

Second Sunday of Lent 2018
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Let's take a quick poll: how many of you get a little nervous when you hear today's first reading? The one about God asking Abraham to sacrifice his child?

Do you every ask yourself, "What kind of *sick* parent would agree to kill their own child? And what kind of *sick* God would ask a father to kill his son?"

Do we *really* have a God who would say to us: "OK, moms and dads, here's a little test of faith: I'm gonna see if you are willing to end the life of your child. Ready. Set. Go."

I've had to preach about this passage for 24 years. And it does raise lots of questions. So I've studied it, read about, prayed about it.

And in my studies, I learned something. In ancient times, human sacrifice was part of many religious traditions throughout the world. Whether it was the Incas and Aztecs; native Hawaiians; or the people of Carthage, Rome, China or Egypt – human sacrifice was part of their ancient religious traditions. Somehow, they thought their deity would be worshipped and their lives would be improved by the death of others, sometimes even their children.

Ancient Israel was surrounded by religions which engaged in this horrible practice. And there is some evidence that, at first, even the Hebrew people thought that this is what God wanted.

Then along comes Abraham, doing his best to understand what God wants. As the story is told in today's first reading, Abraham believes that God wants him to sacrifice Isaac. And Abraham seems ready to do just that.

But by the end of the story, God has decisively intervened. "Abraham, Abraham. Do not harm him!" I don't want the blood of a boy. I want your faith and trust. Do not harm him!

Scholars believe that, through this narrative, God made something clear to the ancient people of Israel. God made it clear that the sacrifice of human lives was NOT what God wanted. While other religions around ancient Israel might continue this practice for centuries, the Hebrew people remembered this story of Abraham and Isaac, and they understood: God does not want us to kill each other. God is not praised when we tell ourselves that our lives will go well if we just sacrifice a child or two.

When we first hear it, this reading may sound horrible and sick. But when this story was first written down, it was a major step forward in our understanding of God. God has said *no* to death.

Still, sitting here in lovely Short Pump, we may cringe at this ancient narrative. We may wonder how anyone could think that the death of a child would be pleasing to a deity, or a guarantee of a good life for adults. Such ‘old fashioned thinking...’

But, sadly, this thinking still lurks in the modern soul of humanity. Even in the last hundred years, children have been sacrificed repeatedly because adults think it will bring some ‘blessing:’

+ millions of Jewish children died at the hands of the Nazis, because Hitler convinced a nation that their future would be bright if just enough Jewish kids died...

+ hundreds of thousands of Armenian children died because the Turks believed this was necessary for their nation’s well-being...

+ countless Chinese children died because Chairman Mao insisted that the future of the nation required their blood...

+ Christian children in Africa keep dying because terrorists who call themselves Muslims believe it is God’s will...

+ numerous Irish children died because their parents, Protestant and Catholic, believed that a Christian God would somehow smile...

The death of children is much talked about these days. And rightly so, after yet another school shooting. But, sadly, that conversation is often lacking in context or clarity, and quickly descends to name-calling and blaming.

Perhaps this is where the church can model a consistent and comprehensive conversation. We *do* need to talk about the value of every human life, every child’s life. A healthy conversation about guns, gun safety, and gun laws, is always important.

But if we are going to speak about the value of children’s lives, shouldn’t we talk about EVERY child?

There are many threats to the lives of young people today. Guns are one of those threats. Yet, according to the CDC, more children die riding in their parents cars every year, than die from guns. More children die from unintended accidents, such as drowning, than from a homicidal attack.

Suicide takes the lives of more children than homicide every year. Doesn't that deserve a robust conversation?

And, in 2014, if you add up every school age child who died because of guns in that entire year, that number is lower than the total number of children who died in abortion clinics in just two days!

In the United States, the most dangerous place for a child to be is... in their mother's womb. More children's heartbeats are violently ended there, than anywhere else. Apparently, there are still American adults who believe that for *their* life to go as they planned, a *child's* heart must stop beating.

The life and safety of *every* child matters. If we are going to talk honestly with each other about this, we should consider the safety and well-being of the child in the classroom *and* in the womb; the child whose life is threatened in a tough neighborhood, or as they seek entry into the country; the child whose life is threatened by poverty, malnutrition, drunk drivers, or easily avoided disease (easily avoided IF you can afford the health care!)

Every life is precious. Every life, from the child whose heartbeat is only detectable through an ultrasound, to the elderly woman whose memories have faded, to the student sitting in a classroom, to the prisoner sitting on death row. Every life is precious.

And about all of them, God says, "Do not lay a hand on them. Do not harm them."

God's own child, Jesus, was sacrificed... killed because political and religious leaders thought that things would be better if *this one* died. But God says *no* to death, and *yes* to life.

In the mist of that first Easter morning, at a tomb which was now empty, God made things very clear: I am not glorified by death – I am glorified in life.

I am the Lord your God. Choose me. Choose life. That you may live... live well here on earth, live fulfilled in Christ, in eternity.