

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 8, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Genesis 22:1–14

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 6:12–23

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as

instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 10:40–42

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

This week we have the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac, also known as the Aqedah. Some might argue that it is misnamed, as Isaac isn’t sacrificed, but I hardly think that makes sense. Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, and had, in his heart, long before the angel stopped him.

Last week I shared some parallels between this story and the story of the near-death of Ishmael, another of Abraham's sons who was sent to die in the wilderness. There are considerable riches to be mined from that relationship and that of the Aqedah to other stories of sacrificed sons, but this week I'd like to focus on the relationship between this and the Passion of Jesus.

As I ponder these two stories, parallels keep emerging. A father is required not to withhold his son, even his only son. The son asks questions - "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"/Gethsemane. The son carries the instrument of his execution to the place of execution (wood for the fire, the Cross). The son is restored to the father, announced by an angel.

Abraham is the type of the Father whose Son is given for the life of the world. Isaac is the type of the Son who goes willingly to the sacrifice. Both of them are signs to the world that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

You have likely read in one place or another the way that this story of Abraham and Isaac functions as a narrative explanation of the way that God's people turned from human sacrifice to that of animals. It isn't an uncommon element of commentaries on this text. I'd like to try to offer an amplification on that insight.

I have mentioned before the affection I have for Rene Girard and his work, often called "mimetic theory." In his work, Girard has brought to light the way that 1) Human beings learn what to desire by imitating the desires of others, 2) These mimetic desires lead to inevitable conflict over the objects of desire as we end up desiring the same objects 3) These conflicts escalate into rivalries that devolve toward the war of "all on all," and 4) The only escape humans have found from this spiraling conflict is the sacrifice of the (innocent) scapegoat, which brings peace.

The benefits of this false peace are fragile and so in the wake of the first sacrifice we create certain safeguards against future wars of "all against all." Prohibition - Laws are made to reign in mimetic desire. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's property." Ritual - The sacrifice of the first scapegoat is repeated frequently enough to tamp down any simmering rivalries. Myth - The story of the first scapegoat is retold in a way that absolves the community of any guilt for killing an innocent scapegoat.

Many students of Girard have set themselves a goal of eradicating violence from religion. By bringing to light the self-serving nature of sacrifice and the way that we continue to create scapegoats without resorting to ritual sacrifice, their hope is to see us (especially Christians) renounce anything related to sacrifice contained in our faith. It is

a noble effort, and its goal of removing from human violence any religious justification is praiseworthy, but there is a blind spot they have that I hope they'll one day address.

Sacrifice is not in itself evil. It becomes evil when we twist it to suit our own ends. Human sacrifice was evil because it twisted something at the very heart of God, the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world, and used it to restore peace, but artificially, temporally, in a way that required constant repetition and harm to others.

What the desire to eradicate all violence leads to is a world without justice, a world without forgiveness. Abraham's call to sacrifice his own son comes most assuredly from his closeness with God and his awareness that it is in God's nature to sacrifice His Son for the sake of Abraham and all God's children. He misunderstood the nature of sacrifice because he failed to grasp the oneness that the Father and the Son have. There is no "otherness" between Father and Son. God sacrifices Himself in the giving of His Son. And He does this to satisfy the demands of justice. He has been wronged. We have been faithless, like Gomer running after other gods, and God is rightly wounded, and justice demands retribution. And so God takes satisfies that demand through the sacrifice of Himself. This is the very nature, the very essence of forgiveness. It acknowledges the wrong and then gives up the right to recompense. And this hurts. We watch a part of ourselves die in order to restore relationship to the one who has done us harm, as Jesus' Father watched Him die on the Cross.

What is lost in the work to erase all hints of violence from the Gospel is the power of that image of God's forgiveness. What is lost is the joy that Jesus had as He approached the Cross, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame..."

We don't stop the process of making scapegoats of one another by denying sacrifice, but by pursuing it, turning it on the wronged parts of ourselves and bringing these to the Cross, all for the joy that lies beyond.

To my friends in the field of mimetic theory, there is no "non-violent Atonement." There is only an Atonement whose violence, properly understood, no longer justifies the making of new scapegoats. We move from Abraham who partially and wrongly grasped the necessity of sacrifice to Jesus, who rightly understood it as an inescapable part of forgiveness.

This Divergence got totally out of hand. I'm sorry about that, but I do get carried away sometimes.

Second Reading

Before diving in (however shallowly) to the depths of Romans 6, I need to apologize again for the translators of the ESV, who have once again twisted the text to suit their ends. In verse 17 where we read (in the ESV), “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,” what Paul really says is, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to *which was committed (handed over) to you.*”

There is a strong tradition in early Christianity of the “handing over” (*paradidomi*) of the teachings from one generation of Christians to the newest group. (Interestingly it’s also the word for betrayal, the handing over of a person to the authorities.) In this case the use of *paradidomi* in the passive mood makes no sense referring to Paul’s readers. They had not been “handed over” to the teachings. By whom? In what way? It’s silly. The passive voice refers to the teachings which had been handed over/committed to them. Okay, on to Romans 6. (Can you tell I’m stalling?)

Okay. So our reading this week begins with the ending that should have been the conclusion of last week’s reading. It really is the final statement that goes with 6:1-12. Then Paul picks up with a new argument, but one that is a kind of restatement of the one we find in 6:1-14. In both these sections a fair sampling of scholars see him refuting a criticism that has been made of his teaching, that is, that Paul’s teaching on grace encourages believers to sin more so that grace might also abound more.

In this particular section though, Paul uses some fairly ambiguous metaphors to make his point. The first is “death.” When Paul uses this word, sometimes he means physical death, other times he means it as a metaphor for a kind of spiritual demise. Likewise, in this section Paul uses slavery as a metaphor for being beholden either to sin or to God. The difficulty here is that Paul’s experience of slavery in his world makes that metaphor less objectionable than it is in the world of our own experience.

The confusion that both of these metaphors bring to our process of interpretation can (at least it has to me) mask his primary point. Being made free in Christ, dying to sin in Christ, neither of these suggest that we have license to sin more so that we might experience more grace. I do think that it is important, when reading phrases like “the wages of sin is death” in Paul, that we remember that Paul’s eschatology is a largely realized eschatology. Yes, he looks to the return of Jesus, but his notion of “eternal life” is a life lived in the present, where Kingdom breaks in on the believer, not something to look forward to. So also, for Paul, “death” in this context is likely to refer to something in the present. Life without the joy and power of Christ.

Gospel Text

These, then, are Jesus' closing words before sending out the Twelve. It follows on Jesus' exhortations not to be afraid as they go out, but the emphasis has shifted. He is telling His disciples what rewards await those who receive the ones whom He sends. I think that this passage has been often misunderstood as an encouragement to receive Jesus, to receive a prophet, to give a cup of water to a "little one" for the sake of the reward, when in fact I believe it to mean nearly the opposite.

I think that this short passage is something of a reversal of our tendency to want to serve the Kingdom in order to receive a reward. That is, Jesus is saying, "If they receive you, it isn't about you, it's about me. They're receiving me. If you go to them as a prophet, your reward will be no greater than that of the one who receives you. It isn't about your reward for being a prophet. If you go to them as a righteous person there is no greater reward in that for you than for them who receive you. Even the one who gives you a cup of water receives as great a reward as you do."

In the end, we all hear the same words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I think that's the reward, and it doesn't vary from one of us to the next. God doesn't create ranks of service and set some of us above others. The ones who enable the prophet are on the same step of the podium as the prophets themselves. Those who provide the water for the preacher on Sunday receive the same ribbon at the end of the race as the one who slaved over the sermon for hours. To me, Jesus is saying, "Go and do the work that's set before you, however great or small. Don't be puffed up if you're called to do more visible work, or discouraged if you work behind the scenes, I see it all."