

A Most Peculiar Saint

Selected verses from Genesis 22 and Hebrews 11

I am reading a version of the famous or infamous, depending upon your point of view, Old Testament Abraham-Isaac story.

Genesis chapter 22: God put Abraham to the test. "Abraham!" he called." "Here I am," Abraham replied. Then God, said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love and go to the region of Moriah, and there at a place I will show you, sacrifice him as an offering.

So early the next morning Abraham got up, loaded his donkey, took with him two of his servants and Isaac and set out for the place God had told him about. When he arrived he said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will provide a burnt offering and worship and then we will come back to you."

[Side note: while I am not going to focus on this, notice something interesting here. Abraham says to his servants that he and Isaac will go aside and worship, and then he says, we, WE will come back to you—as if Abraham knew deep down that God would not take his son. So perhaps Abraham's faith is even deeper than sometimes thought. I'm just saying].

To return to the text: as the two of them went on together, Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb, my son." When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood, bound his son, and took out his knife.

But the angel of the Lord interrupted, "Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him, for I now know the depth of your faith. Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He took the ram and sacrificed it instead of his son as a burnt offering.

This is the puzzling and challenging word of God.

I cannot preach during an interim period without thinking of my friend Tom Hanks. Years ago when we had just begun another such period, Tom was chair of the committee to find an interim preacher, which they had not yet done. At a Sunday night deacons' meeting, Tom said that if worse comes to worse, if things got really, really bad, we could always ask a church member to preach. The next morning he called me.

The Old Testament Abraham-Isaac story is referenced in the New Testament book of Hebrews. The 11th chapter of Hebrews is sometimes called the "heroes of the faith" chapter because it pays tribute to

notable saints of the faith. I am reading selected verses from that chapter and even mixing up some translations.

Hebrews 11: Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. The fundamental fact of existence is that trust in God, faith, is the firm foundation of everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors for by faith Abraham, at the time of testing, offered Isaac back to god. Acting in faith he was as ready to return the promised son, his only son, as he was to receive him Abraham figured that if God wanted to, he could raise the dead. In a sense, that's what happened when he received Isaac back, alive from off the altar.

This is the gospel of grace.

On this All Saints Day I want to focus on a most peculiar but remarkably influential 19th century saint. He was Danish, a Copenhagen man, author of thirty plus philosophical-religious books, with the unusual name of Soren Kierkegaard. That is the way his name is usually pronounced in this country, though I understand that the Danish pronunciation would be "Kierkegore". The truth is his name is such a mouthful that many just refer to him as SK.

Though the word had not been created at the time, I cannot help but imagine that his classmates thought of him as a nerd. Physically, he was delicate. Mentally, he was precocious. Psychologically, he was often depressed.

In his journals he wrote: "I was already an old man when I was born Delicate, slender, and weak, deprived of almost every condition for holding my own with other boys, or even for passing as a complete human being; [he added] melancholy, sick in soul, in many ways unfortunate, one thing I had: an eminently shrewd wit, given me presumably in order that I might not be [completely] defenseless."

In college, SK began preparing for the ministry, but for a while this 19th century nerd became a 19th century playboy, putting aside the constraints of religion, enjoying time at the local pub, and taking forever to finish college. But in the end, his disciplined religious passions won out, and he completed his theology exams with honors.

He became engaged to a young woman, Regina Olsen. But then he felt a call from God to a task so risky, so demanding that he felt he could not ask Regina to join him in such a sacrifice; so he broke the engagement.

What was the awesome task he believed God to have laid on him, a task so demanding that he even had to forgo marriage? It was the task of making clear what it really meant to be a Christian. “Martin Luther [he said] had ninety-five theses. I have only one: Christianity has not been made a reality.” Nothing is truer, he said, than the truest remark ever made about the institutional church: it is a society of people who with the help of certain sacraments evade the duty of loving God.

In the newspaper he would write things like: there is a major difference between the church and the local theatre, the theatre is honest. Ministers, he noted, have taken to preaching in long robes. That’s convenient because if you are wearing a long robe you can conceal a lot and ministers have much to conceal.

Instead of critiquing the values of society, the church had become, he argued, a social club embracing the values of society.

As you can imagine this broadside against the church didn’t go down well with the local clergy. When he died at the age of 42, the Copenhagen clergy debated the appropriateness of burying him in the local cemetery. But they did, and when Alice and I were in Copenhagen years ago, I paid my due respects at his gravesite.

A couple of asides: I began studying Kierkegaard and becoming somewhat obsessed by him when I was in the seminary. I recall getting up one morning in 1963 and reading in the newspaper about the bombing of the African American church in Birmingham, the bombing that killed four children. My immediate thought was that SK would have exclaimed: a church was bombed? It must have been a genuine church; it must have been about the Lord’s business; it must have been critiquing society’s values.

A second aside: Soon after I returned to Baylor to teach, I was in conversation with a young man who had also recently moved to Waco. I mentioned Lake Shore, the kind of community Alice and I had found here, the quality of our minister’s preaching—and I invited him to pay us a visit. He replied that he would like to, but that when he interviewed for the job, he was informed that the company had

members in every major Waco Church except one, and a condition of his employment was that he join that particular church, so that they would have a business connection there too. My immediate thought was of SK spinning in his grave.

Kierkegaard became convinced that "Purity of heart [really] is to will one thing." And the thing he willed was to do what Peter in the book of Acts says that we ought to do: to obey God above all others.

In mapping out the road to such obedience, he described moving through three stages of life. It is these stages for which he is best known.

Stage One: Most people, SK believed, live at the hedonistic level. Life is spent pursuing momentary pleasure in an effort to avoid boredom. Now this level can be lived, argued SK, in a very complex way, but for present purposes let's think of a less sophisticated hedonist. This hedonist says that the first kiss is intensely pleasurable. The second not quite as exciting, and its downhill from there. But after all there are 50 ways to leave a lover, so life can become a series of first kisses. This is the non-faithful love of a Don Juan. And marriage? Marriage is a frightful prospect to the hedonist, because as soon as marriage is mentioned out jumps duty, says SK, out jumps duty like a jack in the box, and duty is boring; so the hedonist keeps his bags packed, his traveling shoes on.

SK hopes, however, to persuade his hedonistic reader that though the hedonist pursuit of momentary pleasure is motivated by fear of boredom, ironically, what is truly boring is the hedonistic life in which all relationships are superficial, life in which you are, therefore, strangely lonely. When the hedonist comes to himself or herself, SK thinks he or she will begin to ask, is this really all there is? Just momentary, fleeting pleasure? And this question can become the motivation to move from the hedonistic life to the moral life.

So, stage two. Instead of a hedonistic pursuit of momentary pleasure, the ethical life is the life of duty, moral accountability, commitment to others. Commitment is not the enemy of the pleasures of love, but in fact, SK argues, gives depth to love because it is pleasure genuinely shared. While there may be unique excitement in the first kiss, it is time, the duration of time, says SK that gives the kiss the value it can really have. Only if there is continuity can there be both pleasure and meaning. The moral life makes relationships possible, makes community possible, makes meaning possible.

And while for SK this moral life is a significant advance over the hedonistic life, and while he anticipates that moral commands, cultural norms and legal rules should under normal circumstances be obeyed, nevertheless, the life of faith involves another move, a third stage—the willingness to obey God rather than others. From the hedonistic life, to the moral life, to the life of faith—this is SK's understanding of life's movement toward union with God.

So stage three: the life of faith. Now let me say in advance that I think there is a valuable point SK makes in his description of the life of faith as being willing to obey God rather than cultural norms and laws. But there is also a problem with this view, but even the problem can lead to an insight.

So here goes. When SK thought of the ideal of faith, he thought of Abraham. When he marveled at what it would mean to obey God rather than human standards, he thought of Abraham setting himself to sacrifice Isaac. The significance of the Abraham-Isaac story for SK is in its dramatic proclamation that for the person of faith, the highest duty is to God, not to human law, not to human morality, not to cultural standards.

Now if you are horrified by the Abraham-Isaac story (and I know of one person who objected to even reading the story from this pulpit), even if you are angered by it, think of it as a metaphorical story, an overly dramatic, maybe even a poor metaphor for those moments in which the religious duty to God takes precedence over human, that is, cultural norms.

Human beings are fallible, open to mistakes. Some times these mistakes are reflected in our morality, in our cultural norms, even in our laws. Think of laws in this country that once made slavery legal, or laws that prohibited inter-racial or same-gender marriages, or laws that required fighting in an unjust war. Because human norms can be wrong, in the last analysis, when push comes to shove, at times one ought to obey God rather than humans.

It is a straightforward argument. Persons are sinful and fallible. So, human laws, moral norms, can be mistaken. But God is perfect; God makes no mistakes. Therefore, one ought to obey God rather than human beings.

But even a moment's reflection uncovers the problem here. Suppose tonight is a lovely evening and you decide to cook out. You're making your preparations and you notice some activity in your neighbor's yard. As you take in what is going on, you see that your neighbor has his son all staked out. You

assume it's some strange, new game. You inquire. To your horror, your neighbor says that God has commanded him to sacrifice his son. What do you do? You know what you would do. You would call 911.

A silly reflection. Not really. We would have called 911 if to have done so would have prevented David Koresh from doing what he did outside Waco in April of 1993 in obedience to what he thought God wanted him to do. Maybe in that case you could say 911 was called and it still turned out to be a disaster.

So here's the rub. We ought to obey God rather than persons because persons may get it wrong. But, as fallible people we may also get wrong what we think God is commanding. And actually, at some level Kierkegaard understood this problem. That is why he called his book on the Abraham--Isaac story *Fear and Trembling*. Surely Abraham set himself to sacrifice Isaac in fear and trembling. He must have known that he might be getting it all wrong. I can pretty much guarantee that Sarah would have thought he had it all wrong. And surely David Koresh had it wrong about what God commanded. And surely the members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas described as "arguably the most rabid hate group in America" have it wrong about what God commands

So how do we cope with this dilemma as we think about the biblical admonition to obey God rather than persons. The answer is ironic; I mean by that, interestingly curious. We ought to obey God rather than persons because persons are fallible and make mistakes. But precisely because persons are fallible and make mistakes, they could also be wrong about what they think God commands. So here is the curious circularity. Person ought to obey God rather than persons, but at the same time persons need to check out with other persons their understanding of what it is they think God wants them to do.

If you or I develop the conviction that we ought to obey God rather than society's norms and laws (as fortunately some Christians did during the days of government-sanctioned slavery, or perhaps as some in this room did during the civil rights movement of the sixties, or in opposition to the Vietnam War, or in recent years in supporting the right of gay people to marry), if you or I develop the conviction that we ought to obey God rather than society's norms we might very well be commended by SK. But if we develop such a conviction, we surely ought to check out that conviction with our spouse, with a friend, with a community of friends.

So blessed are those who when they believe that to obey God requires going against cultural norms have a wise community with whom they can check out that judgment. Is that not what happened right here at Lake Shore, in our organized and lengthy conversations about becoming a welcoming and affirming church? That certainly contravened Baptist norms. We were booted out of the Baptist General Convention of Texas after all.

Ironically, then, reflection on the biblical admonition to obey God rather than persons makes us aware of just how dependent on persons we really are. Moreover, there is something touching, something moving about the fact that to experience a common life together is to depend upon one another's wisdom, judgment, and council. In God's wisdom, we have been made for one another, set down in community, and flourish most readily when we have those to whom we can turn when difficult judgments have to be made—especially when they are judgments and decisions that have to be made in fear and trembling.

So thanks be to God for surrounding us with loving people of wise counsel. Thanks be to God for this community. Thanks be to God for Lake Shore.

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