

Lake Shore Baptist Church Sermon – Charlie Fuller

June 28, 2020

Text: Genesis 22:1-14

Title: *The Cost of Faith*

It's an incredible story. A terrible, horrific story. A most difficult story. I must confess I don't really like this story. It grates on my modern sensibilities.

Let's review. Abraham has been given a promise. A holy promise from God. He will be the father of a great nation. Yet, the promise was in great danger of never being fulfilled. Both Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had reached old age checking the pregnancy test constantly. It never turned the right color. It looked like the days of the promise had passed, that God's covenant with Abraham was no longer active.

Then they had a child. That was a miracle in and of itself. God made a promise. The promise was in danger. The promise was saved by God. The covenant God made with Abraham was still active and in effect.

Now, God tells Abraham to take that very child, Isaac, the child of the promise, and kill him. The little boy that Abraham had held, had read to, played pee pie with – God says kill him. Let's not mince words. To sacrifice the child to God in those days was to kill him.

Can you imagine what that trip was like? It took several days. There must have been lots of conversation. "Hey, Dad, where are we going?" "Oh, a sacrifice. Cool." "How will you know where to do this sacrifice?" "You'll just know when you know? Okay." "You want me to carry the firewood to burn up the sacrifice?" "Okay, but it looks like more than we'll need for a dove or a goat." "Dad, I'm sure getting tired. How much farther do we have to go? Why did we leave the servants behind?"

This story is difficult because it's about human sacrifice. This story is difficult because it's a family story. This story is difficult because God is behaving in a way that seems capricious and arbitrary, a way that seems contradictory to the nature of God we see elsewhere in the Bible.

But the story is also difficult because Abraham is asked to give up that which is the most precious thing in the world to him. His beloved son. The one on whom they had waited so very long. *The power of the story is in the power of what's being asked of Abraham.* Some of us in this community have lost children. Even for those of us who haven't, it's beyond our comprehension to give one up. For any reason. If God asked us to give up a child, we'd quickly ask, "Would you repeat that please? Are you sure? I'm sorry, but I just can't."

And don't you know that Abraham felt the same way?

God does and will call us to give up something. Something precious and something vital. Something we love and cherish. And it will be hard to even contemplate.

And it may very well be something that involves God's promises to us. It may be something that connects us deeply with God that God is calling us to give up, to sacrifice.

God does and will call us to give up things that once seemed to be central and vital to God's call to us. Things precious, things we love and cherish. Things we thought God loved and cherished.

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Lake Shore in these troubled times in which we live, could it be that God is calling us to sacrifice? To give up things we once thought vital and central to who we think we are as a church? To craft a future different than the one we expected?

In 1963, Martin Luther King was thrown into the Birmingham jail. While there he wrote a letter that has pricked the conscience of our nation **and our churches** ever since. Within that letter we find these words:

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the *presence of justice*; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." *Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.*

One of the reasons I've been drawn to King's letter through the years is that he mentions by name some of those white moderate pastors. One of them was the pastor of the First Baptist Church – Earl Stallings. King mentions specifically that Stallings welcomed black people to the First Baptist Church on a non-segregated basis just two days before King wrote this letter. Of course, the release of the letter only deepened the division within First Baptist Church.

I had the privilege of knowing Earl Stallings later in his life when Cindy and I were living in Arizona. Earl was a prince of a man and a genuine Southern gentleman. Years later, Stallings told Samford University history professor Jonathan Bass that he was harassed

and threatened following his decision to admit black worshipers, and his wife Ruth feared for his life when he left home to go to his office.

Let me quickly say that even as we recognize Earl Stallings' sacrifice, it doesn't hold a candle to the travails of our black siblings. Harassment and threats pale in comparison to over 400 years of oppression that continues to this day. As I've said these last few weeks, systemic, structural racism is all around us and within each of us.

But just like Earl Stallings, we have our moment as a predominantly white church, as white Christians. This is a moment for us to listen, learn, and folks it's time to ACT on what we know to be true. This is a moment for us to confess that we have benefited from structural racism, from attitudes and laws and practices that have held back and oppressed Black people and other people of color. Lake Shore, we are very good at talking about justice. We're good at studying and doing research. May we work to be a people of action as well. And as we act, may God give us the courage to give up those things that blind us to the institutional racism in which we participate.

I think we are in our own Abraham moment, a time for sacrifice. As King says in the letter: May our sacrifice be giving up an easy, "negative peace which is the absence of tension" and replace it with "a positive peace which is the *presence of justice*." May we reject shallow understanding and lukewarm acceptance and replace them with justice evidenced in action.

This won't happen because of one sermon or even one summer of unrest. This must become one of our core commitments because it's the gospel of Jesus and this is change that goes to the core of who we are as people of Christian faith.

As Christians, we are a resurrection people. But in order for something to be resurrected, something has to die first. God give us the wisdom to identify those things that must die and the courage to let them go. No matter how precious they might seem, no matter how integral they once seemed to our lives of faith. Help us to give up our expected future and embrace God's holy future, a future of justice for all God's creation. May it be a future where God's beloved community becomes more and more a reality here on earth.

May it be so,

Amen.