

This week was the first week of school for many schools in our area. Parents, students, teachers and administrators have all been busy getting ready for the new year. January is when the new year begins on the calendar, but really the new year, at least socially speaking, begins with the beginning of school. Everyone gets into a more defined routine. It has been especially the case in our household. Alisha has gone back to teaching 2nd grade after being at home with the boys for five years. Andrew has started full-time at the preschool here at the church, and Benjamin has started kindergarten. I have a picture frame in my office that has several pictures of the boys over the last few years and I couldn't help but notice how much Benjamin has grown. It was just the other day that he was crawling around on the floor headed to the bathroom for his bath. And now he is in kindergarten – five days a week all day. I have to admit it's a little weird having a kid in school.

The other night we went to McBay Elementary for "Meet the Teacher Night". As you can imagine, the kindergarten students and parents were the most anxious. This was something new and different. There wasn't a ceremony or anything, but there might as well have been. Kindergarten is that first step in releasing the child to the world. I know exactly what some of you are thinking: "If you think kindergarten is hard wait until they turn 16 and want to drive or go to that college miles and miles away or take that job in New York City. Kindergarten is nothing." That may be true but the fact remains that no matter what age our children are they are still our children and we want to protect them and want what is best for them.

I remember visiting with a lady in the nursing home one day. She was 90 years old and had one daughter who was 70 years old. I wish I had a recording of the conversation that took place between the 90 year-old mother and 70 year-old daughter. The mother was lecturing her daughter about how she was limping around too much on that bad hip of hers and how she needed to go see the doctor about it. Sixty years ago she lectured her about brushing her teeth and now it's a bad hip. The topic has changed but not the concern and love.

Parents love their children. At least that is how it's supposed to be. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Some parents have no business being parents. They not only fail to care for their children, but they are abusive as well, both verbally and physically, and the children are the ones who bear the scars and pain. Usually it's the abuse of drugs and alcohol that change an otherwise loving, caring person into a distant, uninvolved parent. In some cases parents want others to be parents for them.

I had a discussion with a church member once who was concerned about her daughter and more specifically how she felt her needs were not being met by the church. Really what she was doing was using the church as a scapegoat for her lack of responsibility and involvement in her daughter's life. Every problem her child had was because the church and the youth director in particular, were not doing enough. I said to her, "Look, we do the best we can to nurture kids in the faith and be a supportive, positive influence in their lives. Don't expect the church to take on your role in parenting. You need to take responsibility and spend more time with daughter." I hope

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this doesn't sound too much like a Dr. Phil episode but I think our kids today are desperate for caring, loving parents.

In our story about Abraham and Isaac it is clear that Abraham loves his son. God knew how much Isaac meant to him and what a miracle it was for him to be born in the first place. So God used Isaac as a means of testing Abraham. The text says clearly, "God tested Abraham." But what is meant by the word "test"? How does God test us? The most common way of thinking about God testing us is that God sets up some situation for us and sits back to see if we make the right decision, and if we make the right decision then we are in good with God. That is not what God is up to in this story. Testing in this case is really more of an affirmation. God wants to see Abraham apply his faith. God already loves Abraham. God has already chosen Abraham to be the father of a multitude. God has made up his mind about Abraham, and now this test is just a way for Abraham to respond to God's promises.

When we stop and think about it, isn't a test just a means of showing what we know? The learning itself does not come through the test. The test is simply an avenue through which we communicate what we know or don't know. I never did like multiple choice tests in school. I would have a pretty good idea about what the answer to the question was, but then they would throw in that "both a. and b. or none of the above" kind of terminology. I liked essay type tests. These tests just turned you loose. Forget about all this a,b,c, and d kind of stuff, tell me what you know.

In seminary we were required to take two semesters of church history. My last semester of church history I had Ms. Machado. She was an outstanding professor who really had a passion for her subject and the church in general. I'll never forget the final exam. She walked into the classroom and passed out sheets of paper to every student. Then she said, "You have two hours to write down everything you've learned in this class. Go." I thought to myself, "What? We have covered over 500 years of church history. How in the world am I going to decide what to write about? Where do I start?" Well, I started writing and didn't stop until two hours later. My hand felt like it was about to fall off at the end. I was writing and writing and writing and finally halfway through the test I realized something – I knew more than I thought I knew. I just needed someone to ask me the question: "Tell me what you know."

That's really all God was doing with Abraham when he asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac – "Show me what you know about our relationship. Do you trust me enough to take your son and lay him on an altar as a sacrifice?" The phrase "he's a gamer" is used sometimes in sports. That's another way of saying when it comes down to game time this particular player comes through. He may not be the best at practice, but when the lights come on and it's time to play the real game, he shines. Abraham was a gamer.

God said, "Abraham!" Abraham replied, "Here I am!" God continued, "Take your 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 that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early the next morning and did as God commanded. That proves one of two things – either

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Abraham was incredibly stupid or incredibly faithful and trusting of God. Perhaps it's both. Maybe at some level we have to be a little crazy to have faith, especially when it comes to something like this. It's not everyday God asks you to offer your child as a sacrifice. In fact, it's kind of troubling that God even asked Abraham to do such a thing in the first place. Wasn't there another way to test Abraham?

You may or may not have noticed but we try to have some sort of theme for our worship service. I notify Richard of the sermons that I will be preaching over the coming weeks and he in turn selects hymns and anthems that tie in with the sermon text. We also have a picture on the front of our bulletin cover that is somehow connected to the theme for the service. This Sunday our cover is a picture of the sacrifice of Isaac. I have to admit I almost changed the cover because I thought it was a little too troubling.

Go ahead, get out your bulletin and look at the picture. Abraham stands over his son Isaac preparing to sacrifice him to the Lord. Now think about it for a minute. What if we had visitors in church who had never heard this story? What would they think when Bob or one of our other ushers hands them a bulletin with this picture? I can hear it now. Later in the week they go to the coffee shop and say to their friends, "Get a load of this. I visited that Methodist church on Sunday and they gave me a picture of a man preparing to kill his son. I turned right around and got out of there as quick as I could! If anyone asks you to go to that church, turn the other way and run as fast as you can!"

Obviously, I decided to leave this picture in our bulletin. I left it in because it is a visual reminder to us all that this was a very real story with real people. Troubling? Yes. Problematic? Of course. But it does teach us about what it means to offer all we have to God and to trust in God's promises and nature. I have to believe that at some level deep down inside, Abraham knew God well enough to know that God would somehow provide a way out. He had to have some inkling that God would not allow him to go through with such a terrible act.

Well, God did provide a way out. At the last minute he stopped Abraham and provided a ram in the place of Isaac. There would still be a sacrifice of worship to God, but it wouldn't be Isaac. God asked everything of Abraham and Abraham willingly laid it all on the altar.

Years ago, there was a man traveling through South Alabama on one of those hot, sultry Alabama days. He stopped at a watermelon stand, picked out a watermelon, and asked the proprietor how much it cost. "It's \$1.10," he replied. The man dug into his pocket, found only a bill and said, "All I have is a dollar." "That's ok," the proprietor said, "I'll trust you for it." "Well, that's mighty nice of you," the customer responded, and picking up the watermelon, started to leave. "Hey, where are you going?" the man behind the counter demanded. "I'm going outside to eat my watermelon." "But you forgot to give me the dollar!" "You said you would trust me for it," the customer called back. "Yeah, but I meant I would trust you for the dime!" The customer replied, "You weren't going to trust me at all. You were just going to take a ten-cent gamble on my integrity!"

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You see there is trust and there is TRUST. Abraham TRUSTED God. There is nothing in this world more precious to us than our children and grandchildren, and for God to have asked Abraham to offer up his child was asking him to give everything and trust that God would do the right thing.

This last year I visited with two different sets of parents on the day that they lost a child. The first was a couple in their 70's. Their son was in his mid-50's and died suddenly of a heart attack. I went to their house about 1:00 a.m. and the sense of grief and heartache was overwhelming. A couple of months later I went to see a lady who had lost her son earlier that day. He was in his 20's and died in a motorcycle accident. Again, the sense of grief and heartache and hopelessness was unbearable. You could just feel it. In those situations sometimes the best thing to say is nothing at all. There was nothing I could say that could soften the situation or bring back their children. Sometimes we try to say things to make people feel better but in reality it only makes it worse. I have heard well-meaning people say, "I'm so sorry about your son. I guess God just needed another little angel in heaven." I have also heard someone say, "I'm sorry about your son. I know how difficult it must be." I'm sorry, but you don't know how difficult it is. I have never lost a child so there is no way that I can say to someone in that situation, "I know what you are going through."

One thing I can say though is that God hurts when we hurt and that God loves us very much. God loves us so much that the one thing he would not allow Abraham to do – sacrifice his son – is the one, best thing God did for us. It's really kind of eerie when you think about it. Isaac carried wood up the mountain for his sacrifice. Jesus, the Son of God, carried wood also. But the difference between Isaac and Jesus was that Jesus died on the wood he carried to show us how much God loves us. That was God's way of saying to you and me, "You are my child." And at this point I don't have to tell you the things a parent will do for a child.