

Patrons

The Rev. Roderick McAulay: Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
July 2, 2023: Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8, Year A

It must have been at least fifteen years ago that we had new neighbors move in. One morning, soon after their arrival, I was standing in our driveway and the father came bounding across his front lawn and introduced himself. With great enthusiasm he announced, "I am the rabbi of Sebastopol". He wasn't really a rabbi, he was a self-trained lawyer, but he did call together the local Jews who wished to be gathered from time to time.

Some months later, we were approaching the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur, and my neighbor extended an invitation for us to attend an informal service in a local park. He was aware that I was the Rector at the Episcopal Church just around the corner, but his invitation was warm and sincere. We went. It was a warm Fall day and a crowd of twenty or thirty was gather in a circle in a grove of oak trees. Everyone, including us, had brought some apples and honey as instructed. They had invited a real rabbi from San Francisco to come lead them in some Torah study and prayers.

The reason I am telling you all this is that the Rabbi had them read and then reflect on the very same lesson we read this morning: the story of Abraham's call to sacrifice his son Isaac. As we went around the circle, my Jewish neighbors wrestled with this perplexing text. As they puzzled over this troubling story they could have just as easily been a gathering of Episcopalians. I felt very much at home listening to their thoughts. The Rabbi commented that one explanation was

the Abraham had misheard God's instruction, but that would defuse the whole story. It would probably have never been recorded.

When I think about this story, which is told in great detail, I am mindful that Jewish laws governing offerings and sacrifices of thanksgiving often call for the giving of the first and finest new lamb or calf – the first born, or the first and finest grains of a harvest. Isaac is the first-born by Sarah. He is in Biblical terminology the “first fruits”. I have also spent time reflecting on the ancient Jewish rules and practices around animal sacrifice. What I think is that the slaying of a lamb, or calf, or birds, pouring their blood on an altar and then burning the carcass with smoke ascending to heaven, was a means to crossing the divide between life and death, crossing from measured time into eternity, bridging the gulf between human and divine. The Torah repeatedly notes that the aroma of rising smoke was pleasing to God. Sending animals across this gulf was certainly preferable to sending humans and it was a truly visceral means of trying to communicate with God.

What makes this story so perplexing, for my neighbors gathered under the oaks on that Yom Kippur morning and for us today is that God had promised to Abraham that he would become the father of nations, his descendants would number with the stars in the heavens. The two instructions, that Abraham is to be the father of nations and to sacrifice his son, Isaac, are in direct conflict. What are we to make of this story? Why would God ask such a thing of Abraham or any human? What kind of God is this?

To help us penetrate the mystery of this story, we need to detour for a moment. One of the keys in understanding our ancient holy scripture is to understand that the culture of the Old Testament peoples and of the community in which Jesus and his disciples lived required that everyone be in some way connected to a patron. A patron could be a king with a large retinue of both family, slaves and staff, perhaps a small army of warriors. Or, a patron might just be an uncle with a large extended family. As the term implies, patrons were male. Matrons, as leaders and protectors, would be extremely rare. Females all needed to have a male patron to give them legal standing in their community. A woman's patron could be her father or uncle, a brother or husband, or, in time, a son. This the root of the obsession we see throughout our Bible with giving birth to a son. One way or another everyone sought to be connected to a household, large or small. This was the social safety net of the time. It provided protection and status. In return, the clients of the patron provided a variety of services – tending flocks, working the fields, preparing food, mending clothing, serving in the armed forces, constructing housing and barns. Some patrons were religious leaders, guardians of holy altars, overseeing sacrifices, judging disputes, interpreting holy laws. The great temple in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus served a patronal function for thousands of priests. The temple institution was a direct patron for the priests and a secondary patron for all Jews, providing them a symbol that gave them identity and a means of connecting with God.

Abraham was a patron to his extensive household and was being positioned to become a patron to tribes and nations. The sacrifice of Isaac would mean that at his death, his role as patron would vanish. Whether he heard God's command to

sacrifice Isaac correctly or not, this is a story of the depth of his faith. Killing Isaac would not only destroy his beloved child but kill his legacy. This is one Old Testament passage that seems to clearly foreshadow our Christian gospels and the passion of Christ. Just think of that passage we memorized as children in the Gospel of John, that God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son.

Jesus would be perceived as a patron to his disciples. But, Jesus was a very different kind of patron. While he taught and healed and loved all those he met, he did not exact tribute or services. He did not demand the usual duties imposed on clients of a patronal economic arrangement. He did not in turn father sons to carry on his legacy. He did not accumulate wealth to provide for his kin. Perhaps a puzzlement to his disciples, he did not establish an army to drive the Roman soldiers from their land.

Turning to our Gospel lesson this morning we encounter a passage as opaque as the story of Abraham is perplexing. What we read today is the tag end of a discourse that we have been reading for the past several weeks. (It is frustrating for all of us when the framers of our lectionary break whole speeches in to fragments.) Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples, sending them forth into their communities and beyond, empowering them to become, like him, teachers and healers. But he makes clear that their work will not be easy. They cannot expect all the usual benefits a patron is expected to provide – protection, food, shelter, and social standing. Rather, their own families may turn against them, crowds may scorn them, and hardships and hunger may be their lot. In fact, after the crucifixion these same disciples hid in terror in an upper room.

In the words we read today, Jesus refers to prophets and the righteous. He talks of the little ones. Prophets and the righteous are terms used to describe the followers who became missionaries of the first Christian communities and “the little ones” is not a reference to children but to the newly baptized. Jesus says that when a person welcomes and extends hospitality to these faithful, they are one with them. They become one with Jesus and they become one with God.

In short, their patron is not Abraham, or the temple, or Herod or Caesar. Their patron is God, the creator and Jesus the savior. Abraham’s obedience is a story of his acceptance of God as his patron. It is just as true for us today. We, too, have patrons – allegiances we form to give us both economic and spiritual security. Each of us needs to explore these relationships. Your homework today is to take some time in a quiet space and inventory what institutions and people function as patrons for you in your day-to-day life. Then reflect on what it would mean for you if your patron was Jesus. What would it look like for you to be a disciple?