

*Genesis 22:1-14*  
*Matthew 10:39-42*

**word count: 1,803**

We tend to offer hospitality to only a limited number of people--persons whom we already know, relatives and a few close friends. But, in Abraham's time, hospitality was extended to whomever needed it—strangers and acquaintances alike. In fact, in its original form, “hospitality” combines two separate words—one meaning friend and the other meaning stranger. So, from the beginning, hospitality has carried with it the idea of making friends out of strangers.

Today we have a different idea of what it means to have enough to go around than in Abraham's day. We live like kings and queens compared to the wealthiest of people in ancient times. We have luxuries such as at least several changes of clothes if not a wardrobe, furniture, running water, cars, toiletries, machines that help us with tasks that would otherwise take forever, and yet when we think of what we could part with when we are suddenly faced with a stranger with a great need, we usually can't think of a lot we would give away. In Jesus' and Abraham's time, it might not be unusual for people to part with a much higher percentage of their net worth to someone who needed it more.

Hospitality was tied to the idea that God was the ultimate provider. God would favor those who showed hospitality, because they were showing their belief that God would see them through by returning God's favor to the stranger. Give away what you don't need to someone in need, or better yet, savor the joy of giving away something that means something to you. Jesus tells us that to those of us who have, more will be given, and those who believe they have nothing, even that shall be taken away.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is not chosen to be read in churches much anymore. When “Fathers Day” became enshrined on the third Sunday in June, often the lectionary reading that was scheduled for Fathers Day was the sacrifice of Isaac; about a father who hears a voice telling him to sacrifice his son on an altar, and who then carts the boy off to follow through. Preachers everywhere look at this text and say, “Not a good idea this year.”

Abraham has been through a lot recently with God, and now he is being tested again. God calls him, and Abraham doesn't say “*Now what?*” He hears the voice of God, and simply says, “Here I am.”

“Here I am.” Abraham is ready to listen to God, because he believes in a God that will provide, even if the road he is led to isn't the one he would have chosen. The road he walks upon is the road that will lead him to where he needs to be. So Abraham takes his first-born son up a mountain that God has led him to, and Isaac doesn't know what is about to happen. Abraham builds an altar, and prepares a fire in order to make his son a burnt offering. He lays Isaac out on the altar and raises his knife. An angel calls to him just in time, saying, “Abraham, Abraham.”

And Abraham simply says, “Here I am.” Abraham trusts God, no matter how differently God is acting in his life than how he expected. He would show his hospitality to God in giving his most cherished possession—a son given to him and to Sarah in extreme old age. He asks no questions, he just answers by saying, “Here I am.”

The angel tells him that he has proven his loyalty to God, and must not kill his son. A ram appears in a nearby thicket, and Abraham may offer up the ram instead. After this sacrifice, Abraham names this spot “The Lord Will Provide.” Don't worry about yourself, say, “Use me”

instead. In the present, not worrying about tomorrow. Abraham heard the call and woke up saying, “Here I am.”

So, this is also a story about sacrifice. Another example of how good our lives are, rise out of this story. Our views of what God is and what our relationship is to that God have shifted over time. Our ancestors believed that God needed to be appeased by receiving the first fruits of every harvest, including childbearing. There actually was a time when a first-born would be sacrificed to God. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, this custom is revisited in order to release it from the collective unconscious. A new paradigm is constructed in its place—God does not need or want our blood as a sacrifice, but loves us instead. Our lives have an intrinsic value, beginning with Isaac’s. From this time on humanity will not think about human sacrifice. All human life is now precious.

So then, this is a “God is still Speaking” moment not only for Abraham, but for all people living at the time that had previously viewed the deity through a lens of sacrifice and appeasement.

We know (or even are), daughters and sons who have been sacrificed on the altar of so-called obedience to God, to church authority, to the idol of social constructs we hear referred to as “family values,” the marriage of ideology and theology practiced widely in our country today, or even the word “marriage” alone.

Believing that our sons and daughters have to fit into a cookie-cutter theology, many parents sacrifice their children on an altar to an idea of a God that in fact does not exist—a god that accepts only people of a certainly nationality, religion, sexual orientation, even race, while ever favoring one gender.

What or whom are we sacrificing — whether by condemning, killing or abandoning — in the name of obedience as the angel cries out “do not harm this one”?

Even when rooted in sincere concern for both happiness in this life and salvation in the next, such obedience is not faithfulness. Abraham and Sarah are, after all, on a risky yet rewarding sojourn into unknown territory – a promised land towards which God is leading them. They leave everything behind to risk that God’s promises are true. This is not a story of keeping things the way they have always been, but of striking out towards an ill-defined but exhilarating future. “Do not harm the child,” the angel says still. And, we might add, “Come with me to a land where God provides, where the vulnerable are protected, where the knife of sacrifice is laid aside.”

God is still speaking, the passage seems to say, and that still-speaking voice is with us again and again whenever evolved ways of being human present themselves against the altar of sacrifice to an ill-fitting tradition demanded by the past. Out of this dialogue come new ways to recognize the preciousness of humankind in spite of, and even because of the “isms” that cause us to sacrifice others in the name of God.

There was once a monastery in a far away land. The monks used to be very prosperous, but their monastery had fallen on bad times. Worse yet, the monks were having a great deal of difficulty living with one another, and getting along with one another.

One day, a traveling rabbi happened upon the monastery, and met with the monks. They told him of their situation. There had been infighting, back-biting, a lack of forgiveness, prejudice, and a general dissatisfaction they all found with one another.

The rabbi listened to all of the stories very quietly. Then he got up to leave. When he got to the door, he turned to them and said, “There is something you need to know. The Messiah is here among you.” Then the rabbi turned and walked out.

“The Messiah is among you.” The monks heard his words, and thought about them. If the Messiah was among them, who was it? It *could* be the very annoying fellow with whom everyone had some sort of problem. Slowly, they realized that they had to treat each other as though they were in direct contact with the Messiah, for each of them could have been the Messiah. Similarly, they themselves could be the Messiah, so they had to treat themselves with more self-respect. In days, all the problems were readily resolved, and the monks returned to prosperity.

In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus comes to the end of his instructions to his disciples. He has told them that being his followers will not always be easy: some of them will face persecution. But there are rewards for those who welcome those who come in his name. Jesus sometimes spoke in Zen-like Koans. One of my favorites is in today’s scripture.

“He who finds his life will lose it. He who loses his life for my sake will find it.” We are all trying to find our lives. Yet they are already here with us. They are not ahead or behind us. We don’t need things to make them complete. They are already whole in the innate knowledge of the connection we have to each other, to the creation, and to the creator.

Perhaps what Jesus is saying is that if we recognize that our lives here on earth are finite, then we can give them up. Our egos take too much work to satisfy. Our sense of “self” cannot be higher than another’s based on prejudice. This is a false elevation from which we must fall. In just being, we can say, as did Abraham, “Here I am,” and “The Lord will provide.”

He says that when a person receives you, they are also receiving him. Even if we could afford to give someone no more hospitality than a cup of cold water, then the reward of losing our egos, our “busy-ness,” our complete concentration on our own personal satisfaction; is to gain our lives.

Hospitality comes from two words—friend and stranger. Jesus said, “He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me, receives the one who sent me.” Wars are fought, the rights of people are trampled, and the world is an uncivil place because we cannot balance what it means to be hospitable—the welcoming where “stranger” can become “friend.”

And no matter what, we’re here today. We cannot afford to sacrifice the “other” in our midst, often our own sons and daughters, to an outdated, unkind and unjust way of belief, but look to the way that points to what is the most loving expression that mirrors the teachings of the one who pointed the way towards the realm of God.

The rabbi said, “The Messiah is here among you.” Abraham said, “Here I am.” And in all of these things that happened to Abraham, he marked the occasion by naming a mountain “The Lord will provide.” AMEN.

### **Peace Prayer:**

**Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.**

## Scripture—June 29, 2008 Proper 8A

### Genesis 22:1-14

After these things God tested Abraham. He 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 that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill 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, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

### Matthew 10:39-42

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me. He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.