

What a week this has been for St. Margaret’s! Vacation Bible School, Heifer trip¹, J2A pilgrimage, and yesterday we consecrated the 14th bishop of Maryland, the Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton. I had the privilege of being on the pilgrimage to Canada which returned on Thursday. The Journey to Adulthood pilgrims spent months planning and fundraising for their pilgrimage to the Six Nations Reserve –or reservation- and Toronto. We shared a hope of seeking Christ in the culture of experience of First Nations people. First Nations is the term used in Canada to refer to those native to Canada, much as we would say Native Americans.

Eight days before we embarked on this pilgrimage, the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, issued an apology to former students of Indian residential schools in Canada. In this apology he said the following:

The treatment of children in Indian residential schools is a sad chapter in our history. In the 1870's, the federal government, partly in order to meet its obligation to educate aboriginal children, began to play a role in the development and administration of these schools.

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child."

Not only did you suffer these abuses as children, but as you became parents, you were powerless to protect your own children from suffering the same experience, and for this we are sorry. The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools system to ever again prevail.²

Every nation, every culture, every community, every family has dark moments in the past. We all have secrets and wounds, burdens that are rightfully ours or burdens we carry on behalf of another. We have shame over situations in which we abused or were abused.

This morning our lessons include that famous story of our ancestor Abraham as he nearly sacrifices his son Isaac. Some social science researchers believe that this story and its representation through paintings and drawings has aided those who abuse their children in normalizing violence against their sons and daughters. That is a misuse of the power of God’s Word, and violence toward anyone, especially children, whether in residential schools or in homes or in any other context has no place in the beloved community of God’s people. **There is no place in Christian community for abuse.** And yet these moments of darkness are there, lurking in our past, like the complicated and confusing story of Abraham the father of our faith who nearly goes through with the violent act of killing his son.

There is a school of thought out there in Biblical scholarship that suggests that in the ancient world this story operated as a teaching to the community against child sacrifice. Evidently child sacrifice was a standard religious practice for neighboring groups, and the Abraham Isaac story may have been used as a way to say to God’s chosen people: “Our God doesn’t want that from us. We do not need to sacrifice our children to please God. In fact, a lamb or a ram will do just fine.”

¹ Heifer learning center trip: through Heifer International at Overlook Farm, MA- global village simulation experience to learn sustainable solutions to global hunger (<http://www.heifer.org/site/c.edJRKQNiFiG/b.201558/>)

² <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/11/aboriginal-apology.html>

Let's look at the story closely to see what it may be saying to us, in the post-modern world, about how we ought to live and please God. God calls to Abraham and directs him to sacrifice his last remaining son. Remember, last week Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael out to the wilderness and for all intents and purposes can assume they have died. But God saved them, didn't he? So now Abraham has been commanded to go on a journey to a place God will show him, and to sacrifice his son Isaac, the one born to Abraham and Sarah, who was way too old to have conceived and is thus a sort of miracle child to them in their old age.

Abraham sees where he is supposed to do this terrible thing, and he tells the two servants that he and Isaac are going off to worship, after which they will both come back. Sacrifices required a fire- they were typically burnt offerings. So, he puts the wood for the fire on Isaac's shoulders, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. They walk on together and Isaac speaks to Abraham in what is the only exchange we have recorded between them. Isaac asks where the lamb for the burnt offering is, and Abraham explains that God himself will provide the lamb. So on they go.

Then the story gets really horrifying. They arrive at the place God showed to Abraham, and Abraham builds an altar and sets up the wood for the fire. Then he binds up Isaac, I can only imagine that he used rope to do this binding, and he lays the bound up son on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham reaches for his knife, to kill Isaac, when the voice of a messenger of the Lord shouts his name two times- Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. And Abraham sees a ram stuck by its horn in the thicket, and I imagine that before he took the ram out of those bushes he took that death dealing knife that nearly sacrificed his son, his future and the manifestation of God's promise to him, he takes that knife and slides it up under those ropes and liberates Isaac, freeing him to get off that pile of wood, off that altar of sacrifice, and after what must have been a painful exchange between son and father, a ram is offered as a burnt offering instead.

What could God be telling us in this dark moment of our past, in this dark moment where father nearly murders son? I hear God telling us two things. First of all, God is telling us something about being in relationship with God. God is genuinely involved in conversation with each one of us. God interacts with Abraham and with us in ways that indicate that God can become vulnerable, God can take risks and be truly in relationship with us. God is not some far off disinterested being that merely watches us. God interacts and God even says different things at different times, transforming us and growing our relationship, our trust, in God's promises to provide for us. God's promises take shape in the actual lived lives of real people- people like you and me- and our actions and our words are involved in transforming situations around us. Did you hear the part where Abraham ups the ante with God by telling those two servants in verse 5 that after going off to worship "we will come back to you." Plural- we. Abraham calls on the powerful nature of God to be a force in providing another way through the situation. Abraham and God are in relationship, in a two-way relationship where Abraham ups the ante, and then God sends another message to call off the killing of Isaac.

Secondly, God might be telling us that an instrument of death can be transformed into an instrument of liberation if we can not only be in relationship with God, but if we can also hear the messenger shouting at us and re-directing us. "Abraham! Abraham!" Two times the messenger of the Lord calls out his name, not just once like in the first part of this text. We believe in a God so powerful, so engaged with us and our lives, that this very God joined us in human form in the person of Jesus Christ to transform that which is death-dealing into that which is liberating. The same knife that is an instrument of death can be transformed into the instrument that frees us from bondage and allows us to jump off that pile of wood to a place where we can confront whoever is holding the knife.

In addition to the government, the Anglican Church in Canada had a role in the residential school system. It administered and perpetuated these schools for a hundred years, over many generations. And yet it is the same institution that has acted to support the call for an apology, to confront the darkness by supporting the

call for a truth and reconciliation commission to explore the effects of the residential school system. The Church and the government in Canada are taking that knife of oppression and transforming it into a way forward, a way into a future that does not require such sacrifices of God's beloved children.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, spoke to clergy on Friday morning out at Claggett Camp & Conference Center. At some point in her Q& A time, she referred to the Episcopal Church in South Dakota, a place of incredible poverty, especially on reservations. Things are so desperate, and the future is so bleak, that some Native American leaders in those communities have suggested bringing back residential schools to improve the futures of the children. After hearing the effects firsthand from folks affected by residential school abuses in Canada, I could hardly believe my ears! The United States also had residential schools, for which we have not apologized as far as I know, and yet here are Native people asking for such institutions to return? Bishop Katharine went on to say that perhaps there is a new way to use an old and terrifying institution for liberating people from poverty. She did not say whether or not anyone was pursuing this request, yet the request itself startled me.

It startles me, and I wonder: Can God redeem institutions as terrifying as residential schools and transform them into places of liberation? Can God really do that? Yes, God can. I know from our experience as pilgrims in Canada that God can transform. God can do it. God can do it in society- the pilgrims witnessed a society in the midst of transformation in Canada. A society that is opening up and sustaining life in places where it was systematically wiped out in previous generations. There was a liberating spirit weaving through our visit among the First Nations people in Canada. God can do it in a parish community- in Toronto the pilgrims witnessed the transformation of the Church of the Redeemer from a dying, urban parish saddled with overwhelming upkeep expenses become liberated, become free to gather hundreds of worshipers each week. Free to feed hundreds of hungry neighbors each week through their feeding program. Each one of us can be a witness to how God can transform and liberate our families and relationships, too. If we up the ante in our relationship with God, if we listen for God to redirect our ways from that which destroys to that which liberates, we will be able to say that God has indeed provided. God has provided all that we have needed to live, to have the promise of a future blessed by the loving God who longs to be in conversation with us. We can be transformed into instruments of liberation where there was once abuse, oppression, and violence.

Transformation is the heart of our faith. Transformation from death into life, transformation from distance into relationship, transformation from despair into hope – this is what God promises to us. Not just to Abraham. Not just to the ancient people way back when. But to us. Through Jesus Christ we are instruments of liberation in the world, we believe that God will provide, we live as though God will provide, and God will speak to us and God will direct us towards new ways of being liberated and free. We will listen, like all of our flawed ancestors before us we are not perfect, but we can listen. We can listen, we can take hold of God's promise, and we can become instruments of liberation at home, in the community, and throughout the world.