

"I See You"

Genesis 22:1-19

Yesterday I spent time with my three year old grandson Keegan at Centre Island and we had a wonderful day, lots of beautiful memories and on our way home as we were walking through Yorkdale Mall towards the spot we had parked the car, Keegan began to whimper and cry. So I mimicked him. And he stopped immediately lifting his head off my shoulder and looking at me intently. Then he put his head down and whimpered again. I did the same. And he said, "No, Papa". I said, "Well, Keegan we have been doing lots of things together today so I thought it was time to cry together too". "No, Papa" he said, putting his head down on my shoulder once again. A moment later he started to whimper and cry again. I did the same. "No, Papa, only Keegan can cry, not you."

*Love is seeing God
in the other,
Prayer is seeing
God in ourselves.*

It was a delightful moment – one of many that day that continues to build the loving relationship I have with my incredible grandson. I can't imagine being asked to sacrifice him on an altar. Like Abraham was asked in the story found in Genesis 22 to sacrifice Isaac on an altar to God.

It seems unbelievable – something impossible of a God like God to ask. Yet in a quick reading of the text it appears as though that is what God is asking. Surely there must be something more – something we are missing.

And sure enough, when we enter into the text and look at the culture and belief system of the day, we discover that child sacrifice was a practice common in Abraham's time (as horrendous as it is to us). Children were sacrificed to appease the gods, to bring better harvests, to ask for plentiful game. And the commentators suggest that this story is a story that sets God apart from the gods of that culture and time.

So Abraham begins by thinking that God is like all the other gods, requiring a child sacrifice, but in reality, the God that Abraham serves

does not require it at all. This is the learning of the incredible story. It is a story about God who is distinguished from the other gods.

A number of years ago a young 15 year old girl in a congregation I served was raped, smothered, and set on fire by her mother's live in boyfriend. It was horrifying – absolutely horrifying. And as the minister trying to offer pastoral care I was at a loss so many times. What to say? What to do? How to respond? How to care? How to show God's presence and love when violence like this destroys peoples' concept of the world, of life and of God? These were all the questions swirling around. But most of the time I was in a stupor just like everyone else involved.

I heard some people trying to offer condolences (and to be fair they did not know the whole story) by saying, God needed another angel; it is part of God's will; we don't understand it but it is all part of God's purpose – as if God needed the sacrifice of a 15 year old girl.

I remember going to Presbytery that week – looking for support and counsel – looking for someone to talk to, looking for someone to simply understand what we were all going through – indeed, selfishly looking for someone to understand what I was going through as the minister involved.

Instead, I heard words like “Why are you getting so involved?” “Why are you so emotionally attached?” “You need to back away”.

I left presbytery feeling empty, hollow and thinking to myself, “If this is what presbytery is, if this is what the church is, then no wonder so many people are no longer interested in church.”

In the years since, I came across a greeting used by the Zulu nation of South Africa. They speak Bantu and their words for greeting are these: “I see you” and the response is “I am here”. This is so different than our greetings here in North America – “how are you?” and the required response is “I am fine and how are you”. To respond in any other way here in North America is somewhat uncomfortable emotionally and sometimes we want to say – “whoa, too much information – I just wanted to say ‘hi’.”

But among the Zulu nation, "I see you" means as a person, I see and recognize you as another person and I recognize our deep connection to each other. I see you, and I am focused on you right now. The response is similar – I am here. I am not a thousand miles away, no, I am here. I am here with you and I too recognize our deep connection one to the other.

When I came across this beautiful teaching so many years after the event of the young girl's death, I immediately remembered what happened at her funeral.

I was in the little room at the funeral home, preparing emotionally and spiritually for the funeral. The director knocked on the door and said, Marty, there is someone here to see you. And in walked Iris Ford – a minister within the presbytery. And Iris said to me, Marty, I heard that you have a very difficult funeral today, and I want to support you and I want to have a prayer with you. And she did, and she stayed for the entire service, sitting at the back, keeping an eye on me, just to support me and to be there for me.

At the time I almost felt embarrassed. But now, years later I recognize what Iris did. She came to the funeral to say, "Marty, I see you" "I am here to be with you"

And now many years later I say to Iris Ford in my mind, "Iris, I see you too. And I am here."

In that encounter I have found the peace of our gracious and loving God.

Indeed we discover God in stories like these – in simple encounters with each other.

And so I ask you – where is there more hope, more caring, more of God's love as we experience it in Christ? Is it in simple encounters between people when they truly 'see' each other? Or is it in the theologizing we do when we try to comfort people by saying ridiculous statements like "God needed another angel" or "we don't understand it all but God has a purpose for this death and it is all part of God's will."

Who are we to say what God's will is? Actually there is one thing that we can say for sure what God's will is – and that comes from the

mouth of Jesus himself – “A new commandment I give to you: Love one another as I have loved you.”

To love one another is to see each other fully as fellow human beings, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ – to be fully present one to the other, recognizing our deep connection in our identification as God’s children.

I see you! What are your stories of seeing and being seen?