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Gen. 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18

Rom. 8:31-34

“Testing Faith”

This past week has been Spring Break where I teach. When I return to classes tomorrow, my students will be turning in their take-home midterm exams. I wonder how many of my students in answering the questions I posed will have experienced the kind of playfulness and fun-loving exploration of ideas and beliefs that we saw with the children as they talked with Rev. Kim a few minutes ago?

I'm not so naive as to think mature students should be giddy and playful all the time in their learning. But I do worry that when students take a test, they answer the questions in ways they think I want them to answer...rather than writing what they really think and what they really know...rather than exploring new ideas and expressing their own thoughts. There is a joy in discovering and expressing one's belief. And questions often help us tap into that experience...unless we feel like we are taking a test.

Today, I'd like to explore with you the role of questions and answering questions in our faith.

When it comes to questions about our faith, how do we answer? Consistently truthful, based on our real beliefs—even when this means answering ‘I don't know?’ Or do we sometimes pull out pat answers we learned in our youth...even when we hear those answers fall flat in our own ears?

One of the things I appreciate about the Swedenborgian tradition is the role of the mind in our life of faith. Swedenborg himself placed the brain, or specifically the cerebrum, at a central place in the mystical interaction between heaven and earth. In his work called *The Universal Human*, he wrote, “[I]t is only through humanity that there is a descending from the heavens into the world and an ascending from the world into the heavens. It is the cerebrum and its inner reaches through which the descending and ascending occur. There we find the basic essentials, the first and final ends from which flows and derives each and every thing in the body. There too we find the source of thoughts, which are proper to discernment, and of affections, which are proper to intent.” For Swedenborg, it is the cerebrum which allows people to become that important, mystical conduit between heaven and earth; between the Divine and humans. His message here is that our minds are engaged in fully in our faith. Our minds play an integral role in faith.

So when we encounter texts, beliefs, and practices from our Judeo-Christian tradition that are complex and difficult to understand, how do we—each and every one of us--actively make sense of them? Do we resort to pat answers and old interpretations? Or do we ask our questions and seek authentic answers?

When we hear passages like the story of Abraham and Isaac, for example, what do we do with this text?

This story is known by a few different names, and one of them is “The Testing of Abraham” or “The Testing of Abraham’s Faith.” And to be honest, if God was in fact giving Abraham a test, I’m not convinced that Abraham really performed well on this test, the biggest test of his life. For the very first time, Abraham appears silenced by fear

and by anxiety. His own apprehension, and even more so, his own willingness to sacrifice his dearly beloved son produces anxiety in us. The story is disturbing. It's meant to be. It also raises lots of questions. It's supposed to. But do we ask those questions that we have or do we settle for interpretations we think we are supposed to believe?

The last time I heard this passage about Abraham and Isaac read was last year at the Easter Vigil at a Catholic church. For me the Easter Vigil is the most powerful and awe-inspiring celebration in our Church year. When the story was read, pretty early in the service, I watched a boy who was sitting in front of me. He was probably around 8 years and his reaction to the story was dramatic. He was riveted. At the moment when Abraham raised his knife to kill Isaac, this boy, sat up in his chair and looked up with alarm at his father.

I felt I was hearing the story for the first time. I sensed Isaac's fear like never before, because I saw fear on this boy's face. I watched with interest when I saw the father smile, and put his arm around his son and say, "Shhh, shhh, shhh. Don't worry. It's ok. Listen to the ending."

In watching this, I thought to myself: I wonder if that answer is gonna be good enough. Or will there be more questions coming up tonight or tomorrow or maybe in a few years as the boy prepares for confirmation. Once we have an important question on our minds, it's hard to let it go. But especially when we have questions about faith, we can find it hard to find answers that work for us over the long haul of life. As a result, we can sometimes stop asking those questions altogether.

I didn't think more about the boy's response or about the story of Abraham, myself until the mass was over. There I was walking out of church with my husband. I was feeling the joy of the resurrection that Easter represents! I was happy. And I was grateful that I was able to share that three hour experience in church with my husband who is a professed Agnostic. For him the prospect of spending three hours in church had been something he had put off for years. I understood that, and I had also wanted to share that liturgy with him at least once.

So, when we left mass that night I expected a pleasant conversation to ensue when I asked in a breezy kind of way, "So what did you think?"

Well. He did tell me what he thought and it was, in a word, challenging. Even though 2.5 hours had passed since he had heard it, his thoughts and concerns were still on this passage about Abraham and Isaac. He said many things about Abraham, but his remarks ended with a pointed assessment and then a question directed at me: "I don't like the use of religion to support killing people. It sounds like child abuse to me. What do you make of the text?"

Even though his question was open ended and his voice had become calm, I suddenly felt like I was taking a test. I felt that all-too familiar anxiety creep in. And I heard myself offer cleanly memorized answers: Abraham is known as the Father of the Faith, I said; his faith in God was so profound, he was willing to sacrifice his only son, I continued. Then I emphasized how this story is upheld as the supreme example of faith in both the Jewish and Christian traditions; and I added that Abraham is revered in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

It was then that I realized what I was doing: I was reciting what I thought my teachers long ago had wanted hear. And as a result, I had come to believe that since Abraham had been revered and honored by so many people of different faiths, I felt like I should accept all the common interpretations of this text. I had stifled my own questions because somewhere deep inside of me, probably stemming from the Sunday School of my youth, I thought it was disrespectful to have questions about my faith.

It was one of those deeply ingrained teachings that I had learned. And so by not ever having asked my questions about the story of Abraham and Isaac, I was unprepared for the test of my own faith that night. I couldn't answer my husband's question from any sense of my own real faith.

In fact, I had lots of questions about this text, and because I failed the test my husband gave that night, I started studying on my own terms, which included an eclectic range of sources and traditions:

1. My first question had to do with Isaac's mother, Abraham's wife, Sarah: did Sarah know about this? Where is she? These questions brought me into the rich Midrash tradition of Jewish biblical commentary. Rabbis for centuries have studied Scripture and have forged interpretations to fill in missing gaps in narrative, logic, and belief. One ancient rabbi put forth that Sarah was so angry at Abraham, she never spoke to him again. Other rabbis have proposed that this episode was so shocking to Sarah, that the trauma killed her. Both these suggestions make sense on many levels; and in very next chapter of Genesis, Sarah is dead. I have come to conclude that Sarah was not complicit with Abraham's plan.

2. My second question had to do with God and with Abraham. Would God really ask someone to kill their own son in order to test their faith? While we can never know fully the wisdom of God, some scholars have questioned the standard teaching that God tested Abraham and Abraham passed the test. They have noted, if Abraham “passed the test” as is so often thought, why is it that God never speaks directly to Abraham again. Up until the time Abraham is on the mountain with Isaac, God addresses Abraham directly. In response all Abraham says is “Here I am.” When God tells him to sacrifice his only son, Abraham is silent. No questions asked, he goes to fulfill God's order. Since his response is out of character from what we know about Abraham in previous stories, I wonder if now when put to yet another test, he just gave the answer he thought God wanted. It's true that Abraham is rewarded for his obedience with God's renewed covenant. But after that fateful scene, Abraham's relationship with God changes. His relationship with God continues, but only through an intermediary, an angel. God no longer speaks directly to him. One could even argue that Abraham, known within Islam as “Friend of God,” may have ruptured his relationship with God by not asking God questions; by not keeping their relationship open through real active engagement. Far from being disobedient or disrespectful, asking questions presumes a real relationship exists; a relationship of mutual respect and concern. But Abraham asks no questions here.

Rather than being an episode upholding and promoting blind obedience, the story of Abraham has come to highlight for me the grave danger such obedience and such faith can lead one into. Blind obedience and blind faith can bring us to the brink of destroying our loved ones.

I have, of course, plenty of other questions. Some are about Isaac: could he ever trust his father again? Could he ever trust God again? Other questions are about other tenets of our faith....And I wonder: what are the questions you have?

It is only when we choose to ask our questions--when we dare to be in a real relationship with our God and with our own Church--that our faith becomes authentically our own. When each of us enters these doors and brings with us a dynamic faith fueled by questions and debate, we all feel that energy that comes with authentic faith. And our Church is the richer and stronger for it. Supported in such a community of vibrant faith, we find a place where we can ask our questions and we can find the resources we need to prepare for the tests of faith we all face during our lives. These tests..these real tests...are never as easy as classroom exams. They usually come in conversations and situations that can truly affect another person's life...including our own.

For this reason, this year, during this season of Lent, I decided not to give up something, like Catholics sometimes do. Instead, I decided to start asking my questions. Because I really do want to be ready the next time my husband asks me a question about faith.