

“Letting Go of False Loves”
Genesis 22:1-14
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *Savior God, your Word is a lamp to our feet in our journey. Walk with us. Guide us with your wisdom and grace. Amen.*

Did you know that former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer once prosecuted Abraham, the biblical patriarch, for attempted murder and child endangerment?

It sounds crazy, I know, but it actually happened. On November 16, 2014, a Manhattan synagogue, *Temple Emanu-El*, hosted a mock trial: *The People vs. Abraham*. Spitzer served as prosecutor, Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz defended Abraham, and District Judge Alison Nathan presided. Over 1,200 people in attendance served as the jury.

Spitzer argued that Abraham's **intent to obey God proved his intent to kill**, jokingly offering a lenient sentence of 2,000 years of community service. Dershowitz countered that God only asked for an **offering**, not a **killing**, even citing Bob Dylan's retelling of the story in *Highway 61 Revisited*, where Dylan imagines this exchange between God and Abraham. You may know the lyric:

God says, "*Kill me a son,*" and Abraham replies, "*Man, you must be putting me on,*" which is a 1960s slang for "*You've got to be kidding me.*" Then God responds with a flat-out threat, "*You can do what you want, Abe, but the next time you see me comin,' you better run.*"

Dershowitz's point is that Abraham was dealing with an absolute authority that effectively gave him no choice—a classic legal defense of **coercion and duress**, which argues a person committed a crime because they were forced to do so through threats of harm or death.

And it worked. The jury acquitted Abraham on both counts. Later, Judge Nathan joked that she should have dismissed all twelve hundred people from the jury box "for cause"—meaning they would be considered impartial since just about everyone in the synagogue was a descendant of Abraham.

The mock trial was both serious and funny if you like court trials. It's still available on YouTube.¹

For centuries, though, the story of the sacrifice of Isaac has troubled thoughtful people. Everyone from St. Augustine to Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard to German novelist Franz Kafka has wrestled with this story. So how are we to understand it?

At the outset, notice something important: Isaac is not merely an only child. **Isaac is hope.** Everything God had promised Abraham and Sarah rested entirely on this one child.

Remember **God's promise**? Abraham would become the father of many nations, with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5). There was just one problem: Sarah was nearly ninety years old and still childless. Safe to say, that's not the age when couples start browsing baby registries or picking out baby cribs.

But God provided. Sarah conceived, and Isaac was born. Everything Abraham had ever hoped for was now wrapped up in this single child.

Then comes the **shocking command**. God said, "*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love...and offer him.*"

Offer Isaac? We're stunned. Why would God give Abraham this miraculous son—the very child through whom God's promises would be fulfilled—and then ask Abraham to give him back?

The command also unsettles us because it **challenges our idea of God**. We don't expect the God who gives also to ask something of us. We don't expect the generous God to demand our deepest love. We want a **benefactor**, not a **challenger**.

But perhaps that is exactly the point. Sometimes God wants us to give up the things we love so dearly. Why? Because they become "**misplaced loves**" or, as St. Augustine said, "**disordered loves.**" We have turned good, secondary loves into our primary devotion.

¹ *The People of NY vs. Abraham.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byDFsQ0XST4>

Look, Abraham's struggle is our struggle. God gives us wonderful gifts—our families, our careers, our homes, our churches, our country, our friendships. Yet over time, those gifts can quietly take God's place in our hearts. **We begin to love the gift more than the Giver.** We pin our hopes on what God has given rather than on God, the giver.

God provides us with a land to live in. A country is God's gift. Patriotism is a beautiful thing. Earlier, we sang “How Beautiful, Our Spacious Skies,” better known as “America the Beautiful.” In the Philippines, we would substitute the word “America” for “My Philippines.” But I love Ray Charles’ rendition of it, adding one word: “America, **sweet** America.” As wonderful as the traditional hymn is, Ray Charles brought something even deeper to it in his jazz, soulful rendition.

Now, I probably shouldn't admit this from the pulpit, but I’ve always found jazz a true expression of the American spirit—sorry to the classical purists out there! Last night, Des and I went to the Jazz Festival in Rochester. We watched *Trombone Shorty’s concert* at Parcel 5 right in downtown Rochester and tried to match the band’s energy. We failed, but we danced anyway, along with the crowd. Had so much fun.

Now, some of you may not realize that *America the Beautiful* is actually a **prayer**. There is a line that keeps repeating: “*God grant that we may be a sisterhood, a brotherhood; a nation blessed with none oppressed; a hemisphere where people live in harmony.*”

It’s a prayer for unity, inclusion, freedom, peace, and non-violence, and even stewardship of creation: “*spacious skies, purple mountains, fruited plain.*”

It’s also a **prayer for humility**—one that asks God to correct our national flaws. “*How beautiful, sincere lament, the wisdom born of tears, the courage called for to repent the bloodshed through the years.*” While the *New Century Hymnal* had changed the words, the original lyrics are no less a prayer for repentance. “*God mend thine every flaw.*”

When you look at its history, it makes perfect sense that the hymn calls us to this kind of humility. Katharine Lee Bates wrote these words as a poem in 1893. A social activist, she was deeply concerned about the inequalities of the *Gilded Age*, including urban poverty and the treatment of immigrants. When she wrote, “*Refine till all success be nobleness, and every gain*

divine," she was challenging the greed and materialism she saw around her. Her vision was of an America defined not by wealth or power, but by character and moral purpose, a vision echoed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. several decades later, when he said, "*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.*"

That's why I find it entirely appropriate to sing this hymn as we enter the Fourth of July week. We just have to guard against **confusing our allegiances**—putting the nation above God, or letting patriotism rival our loyalty to our Creator.

It brings to mind Abraham Lincoln's famous exchange during the Civil War. Someone told him he hoped the Lord was on the Union side. Lincoln wisely replied that the real question was not, (and I'm paraphrasing) "*Is God on our side?*" but rather, "*Are we on God's side?*" He would later repeat this understanding in his *Second Inaugural Address* in 1865.

The same thing can happen with the church.

God gives us the church as a **means of grace**. But even the church can become an idol. That happens whenever we place our hope in outward religion, tradition, or a preferred way of doing things—rather than anchoring our lives in Christ. God gives us a sacred text—the Bible—but we can easily fall into **loving the pages of the book more than the living God** it points us toward. We can reduce scripture to a checklist of rules, creeds, and doctrines, missing the heart of Christ entirely.

Well, guess what? People don't care about denominations or religious identities that much anymore. In his article for the *Sojourner Magazine*, Stephen Mattson writes, "When I'm in the hospital, and you send me a get-well basket, I don't care what your church denomination is. When you help my grandmother carry heavy groceries, I don't care what you believe about evolution."² For Mattson, what matters is the way we treat other people.

² Stephen Mattson, "When Christians Love Theology, More than People," *Sojourners*, January 22, 2014. <https://sojo.net/articles/when-christians-love-theology-more-people>

Three years ago, our church office received an email from the Activity Director at the *Chemung County Nursing Facility*. A resident wanted a pastor to visit him because he said he used to attend our church.

I gladly went, only to discover he had attended the United Church of Christ in Amherst—not ours.

When I explained the misunderstanding, he smiled and said, "I don't mind what church you come from. I just want to connect with God, and I need help. Thank you for coming."

Exactly.

People are usually looking for God, not our labels or denominational affiliation. The problem isn't God's gifts. The problem is when God's gifts become substitutes for God.

Perhaps God sensed that Abraham was beginning to love Isaac more than he loved God. So God said, "Offer Isaac to me."

Then, of all things, Abraham obeyed. He did as he was told. You might call him a fanatic. But he trusted God enough to obey. He rose early the next morning. Well, of course he did. He had to leave before Sarah woke up! Can you imagine that conversation?

"Honey, Isaac and I are heading up the mountain. I'm going to sacrifice our son. See you in a few days." Do you think Sarah would have replied, "Sounds wonderful! Have fun sacrificing our son!"

Abraham quietly obeyed. For three long days, he walked toward Mount Moriah, muttering, "God will provide. God will provide."

And then, just as Abraham raised the knife, the angel stopped him. Stopped him from slaughtering Isaac. God had seen enough. Enough faith. **A faith that refuses to turn a gift into an idol.** Isaac was God's gift, but Abraham refused to love the gift more than the giver.

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in the thicket. God provides. On Mount Moriah, God provided a substitute.

As Christians, we cannot read that scene without thinking of another mountain. Another son carried wood up another hill. On Mount Moriah, God provided a ram. **On Calvary hill, God provided God's Son.**

On the cross, we see love, love that knows no bounds, because that's what love is—it doesn't hold back. We see a love so intense that **it will sacrifice itself for us.**

So here is the challenge for us today: Is there something in our lives we're holding onto so tightly that we've forgotten the One who gave it to us? Is it our family? Our career? Country? Political party? Maybe even our church?

These are all wonderful gifts from God. Love them. Care for them. Be grateful for them. **But never worship them.** We can be loyal to them but not above God.

As we prepare to celebrate the Fourth of July, our nation's *semiquincentennial*—250 years as a nation—we have so much to thank God for, especially our freedom of worship. Unlike Christians in many parts of the world, we're not being tested to lay down our lives for our faith. We are simply being called to be faithful right where God has planted us.

But our greatest freedom is not political. It is the **freedom to belong to Christ.** Our highest loyalty is not to a nation, a denomination, or a political party. Our highest loyalty is to the God who gives every good gift.

So let go of your false loves. Your misplaced devotion. Trust the Giver more than the gifts. Hold God's blessings with open hands. For the God who gave Isaac...the God who provided the ram...the God who gave his own Son...is the God who will provide for you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.