

[Readings: Gen. 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Ps. 116; Rom. 8:31b-34; Mk. 9:2-10]

What to make of one of the most shocking stories in the Bible –the story of Abraham and Isaac? On the one hand scholars urge us to hear this story as a “test of faith.” God did not want a human sacrifice; the key lies in God’s words to Abraham: “I know now how devoted you are to God.” But what kind of God would subject a person to such a test? We hear nothing of Abraham’s feelings; he doggedly takes Isaac up the mountain and has the knife out and ready. Yet for the hearer the story is full of emotional tension, even horror. How can we read it impassively? In response to Abraham’s faith God makes a promise -- but by seeming to call for the offering of the child who embodied God’s earlier promise. Why? How do you respond if you were asked to sacrifice your son or daughter?

In my thirty-nine years as a priest I can honestly say that the saddest and the most traumatic human experience is the loss and burial of one’s child. Regardless of the age, for a parent to bury their son or daughter is unnatural. Parents are supposed to go first. So that makes the Abraham/Isaac story even more foul when one thinks that God would expect such a sacrifice from anyone.

So why would God Himself give up HIS only Son for us?

Seeing familiar things differently is not easy. This is no more evident than in family relationships. Your spouse is changing, as are you. Yet you expect the dynamic between you to remain the same as always. A renegotiation of terms may feel like a betrayal.

Many years ago, my dear friend Barbara recalled the celebration of her 25th wedding anniversary at a Mass officiated by her pastor, Fr. Frank. At a parish mass, Fr. Frank asked Barbara’s husband Fred: “Do you love Barbara?” He said, “With all my heart.” “Barbara, do you love Fred?” Barbara answered, “I don’t know.” There was an audible gasp in the church! Fred looked at her bewildered. Then Barbara explained, “Fred and I are not the same people we were when we were married. We have both grown and evolved. I love the man Fred has become, and I hope Fred loves the wife I have become.”

Babies become toddlers, and children become teenagers and then adults. But the parents' vision of them may be frozen at a more primitive and dependent stage. I graduated from the Pontifical North American College in June of 1981. Some of my classmates began an email campaign of contact with the thirty of us, catching us up on what the last forty years have been like. As I read each email, I pictured them as I last saw them – 27 to 30 years old, healthy and eager to change the world and protect the Church. Some, like myself, said in their emails that they are now gray-haired or no-haired, overweight and in fair health. All of us are pushing 70 years old. But I freeze frame them in my memories of them.

In the same way, parents are the ones who are there for us, reliable as rocks. Until the time that they become elderly and frail, and unexpectedly dependent on us to care for them.

If lifelong friends suddenly develop new opinions or speak their minds more freely, our jaws may drop and we may wonder if we ever really knew this person we've always known. Technology creeps into the workplace bit by bit, and one day we realize our profession today is not the same as the one we entered. Everything is changing; that's the nature of being.

But since most changes happen under the surface over long periods, we don't always see transformation coming until it hits us right between the eyes. My friend tells me that his mother was a big talker, a huge personality, and his father like wallpaper in a room. In later years when his father became too infirm to remain at home, he was moved to a nearby nursing home. There he became boisterous, witty, the life of the party!

In the same way, a teenager might become almost anyone once out from under the family influence. I remember one year in high school, it seemed that I changed my personality almost every week or at least once a month. Maybe that is why I can impersonate so many different people so well. I became a chameleon... and a comedian!

Then there is the geeky character in a movie who may be redefined as the hero once circumstances change, drawing the inner hero forth. Has that ever

happened to you, where you had to rise up to the challenge and found an inner strength that you didn't think was there?

When the disciples first ran into Jesus, they certainly saw Him as a remarkable figure. What He was saying and doing was amazing enough for them to walk away from business as usual and head off into a life full of unknowns. What would it be like, we might wonder, to yawn in the presence of a miracle? But we do so every day if our hearts and souls are closed. If we are going to repent and to be converted this Lent, we need a deeper faith.

One of the most epic spiritual quotes of all time is from St. Augustine. He said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, o Lord." Our hearts are restless, every day, every week, every month, in different ways to different degrees for different reasons.

One of the invitations of the spiritual life is to locate your restlessness, is to locate your discontent and your dissatisfaction because God is speaking to us through that restlessness. He's speaking to you through that dissatisfaction. And we all experience this. We experience it in our work, we experience it in relationships, and we experience it in general about ourselves and the direction of our lives. What are you restless about?

What are you restless about? And how are you going to work that out? Are you likely to work that out in a crazy, noisy, busy world in the midst of constant distractions? Or in order to work out what you're really dissatisfied with and where restlessness is coming from, do you need to go into the classroom of silence and sit down with your God for a few minutes each day and really pinpoint that discontent, that dissatisfaction, that restlessness?

And so our restlessness really is an invitation. It's an invitation to think about our lives. It's an invitation to think about what we are dissatisfied with. And it's an invitation from God. What's it an invitation to?

It's an invitation to grow, it's an invitation to improve, it's an invitation to leave behind yourself of yesterday and to embrace yourself of today and tomorrow, to turn away from your-lesser-version-of-yourself and to embrace a-better-version-of-yourself, as Matthew Kelly likes to say. In religion and

spirituality and theology, this process is referred to as conversion. And what is conversion? It's a process of changing from one form to another. Changing from one person to another? No. Changing from one form to another, one form of yourself, a lesser-form-of-yourself to a better-form-of-yourself.

And as we explore this prayer of the heart, what we will discover is that the reason most people don't pray, the reason most people stop praying, is because we aren't willing to participate in the conversion of the heart. Because prayer of the heart always leads to conversion of the heart. But it's an invitation that we can accept or reject. And so the question is: are you willing? Are you ready to accept God's invitation to go deeper to go to a better place to live a better life? Are you ready to accept that invitation?

Who is Jesus for you? Do you listen to Him? How much are you willing to sacrifice for Him? This Lent, we're changing, maybe in ways that are quiet and unseen for now. Who Jesus is for us may be changing too.

Listen to Him. AMEN!