

Sinverguenza – Proper 12C – Pent+10C

You gotta love this Abraham. Not only is he the willingest of all men, who “just says, ‘Yes’” when God tells him what to do -- which action puts him in a class with the best of all characters in our sacred history -- Abraham’s life story is also peppered with all kinds of shenanigans, shady behaviors and admirably clever repartee. This makes him believable, but also fallible, maybe even surpassable by the likes of you and me. We are more comfortable with Abraham as our grand spiritual patriarch, because he don’t set the bar too high. Likewise the Jews and Muslims consider Abraham the founder of their religions – perhaps for similar reasons. Jesus is way better than we’ll ever be, but Jesus is God. But as far as pure humans go, Abraham is where it’s at, at once perfectly pious and all too imperfectly behaved – the way we would want to be remembered, with good intentions mitigating our plentiful mistakes.

The great Stephen Fry has a monologue caroming around the interweb these days, in which he elegantly sums it up: “Part of life is learning what to be ashamed of and what to be proud of. I’m proud to be who I am when I’m good, and I’m ashamed to be who I am when I’m bad. But I can’t apologize for who I am or what I feel. To apologize for feeling is a silly thing; it’s crazy! What would another species think of us if they caught us doing that? Yet, sadly it is what we do all the time.”

Abraham’s stories can help us move away from this sad proclivity -- to make excuses for our nature -- if we listen to them closely. He just is who he is, unapologetically, and we are faced with the prospect of accepting him – as they say, ‘warts and all’ -- or removing ourselves from the story of humankind. It’s not a Christian thing, it’s a human thing. Is it any wonder

there are so many heart-stopping songs that talk about love as an acceptance of and desire for someone in their present state? Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields, Billy Joel and countless others touch us deeply with thoughts of “...Never, never change; keep that breathless charm...” and “...Don’t imagine you’re too familiar... I love you just the way you are.” We long for acceptance by and connection with a God who loves us ‘just the way we look tonight.’ The fact that Abraham is the founder of the faiths, so to speak, gives us great hope. If God can love him, surely God can love us!

So today, Abraham gets into a diplomatic negotiation with God for the lives of the famously naughty citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. Great dialogue and masterful narrative technique recount the hondeling session between Abraham and God. And we must bear in mind that when Abraham, the central character, the role model, the seminal figure of our spiritual backstory is negotiating with God, he is really negotiating with himself. Since the dawn of the scientific era, we can’t really buy into the concept of an angry God running around destroying things.

What we can do is engage in ongoing re-telling and re-interpretation of our sacred stories, looking for clues and guidance and connections that will help us know the difference between what we can be proud of and that of which we will eventually, inevitably be ashamed. Poet Derek Walcott puts it like this:

Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving

at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

So Abraham is really negotiating with himself, "If I'm all bad, then I'm all bad, yes, but what percentage of me has to be good in order for there to be hope?" In the wry, witty and affectionate exchange he has with God, Abraham elicits, admits really that even a tiny grain of hope is enough to transform a life. In this story, it is the life of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but really it is Abraham's own life, and ours too, that is destined for salvation based on the tiniest glimmer of hope, the most halting and elusive desire to look for the nature of God's goodness and live it out.

I spend most of my Friday evenings down at the East Side of the ironically-named California Men's Colony. I am privileged to volunteer as a sponsor of the gospel choir rehearsal, whose members perform on Wednesday nights and twice on Sundays. One of the most pleasant, insightful and talented members – I'll call him Jerome – is a wonder to me for his grace and peace and enthusiasm, with a whole lot less hope than you or I can imagine thriving on. Jerome is a music minister and a powerful

force in his community, despite the fact that he is serving 100 years plus a life sentence for drug-related crimes. He has managed to live in love and hope, despite his seemingly hopeless circumstances.

This is the kind of hope that we can relate and pass along to our succeeding generations, as it has been passed along from Abraham to us. This is the gift we can give our children: the conviction that they are loved the way they are, and their attempts to pursue goodness, however grand or successful, have value; they count.

I recently had the delight of a road trip with my eldest child: nothing better than the one-on-one time. Having kids around gives you a reason and an excuse to study/revisit/reassess the stories you have been told and have been telling. You don't want to give them any scorpions, you want to give them eggs! We spent time in the deYoung museum looking at sublimely beautiful objects from New Guinea, and later we visited the Getty Villa in Malibu, where a magnificent collection of Greek and Roman antiquities is housed. One thing that struck me was the far stronger connections these cultures enjoyed between spiritual hunger and daily life, between art and work, the sacred and the secular, the profound and the political. Because the objects they used in daily life were not only made with their bare hands out of the natural substances that surrounded them, but also modeled as tangible implements of their spiritual lives, the enterprise of living a godly life was a far more obvious one for them than it is for us. We talk in metaphors, at a distance. God as Jesus was with us, but a long, long time ago. As a community, we tend only to remind ourselves of God's presence among us once a week, twice if we're lucky. In ancient cultures, by contrast, godliness was always tangibly present in their work and art and every other

aspect of life: birth, politics, war, sex, death, and especially the natural world around them.

In many ways, we have taken to giving scorpions (that is, bad information) to our kids and ourselves by moving away from the direct influence of the natural world on our relationship with God. In Egypt, for example, cats were not worshiped, but they were acknowledged as windows to and useful interpretive mediums for the deity. Could we not benefit from stopping to absorb the power of the natural world, pouring out our hopes and fears to the hills, the sun or the sea from time to time and contemplating what they have to teach us?

If we would pass along fresh fish and tasty eggs to our children, we must somehow regain the immediacy of God's presence in our lives, a way of living that has been lost in the maelstrom of cultural development. Notice this already starting with Paul who admonishes against "cosmic spirits" in today's portion of his letter to the Galoshes.

This doesn't mean we worship the toaster oven; it means that we remain aware that our ability to build a toaster oven doesn't make us one whit less needy when it comes to self-awareness and Godly forgiveness. We are Abraham's children. Sarah laughed when she learned we would be born. Our existence is miraculous; of that we can be gratefully proud. Our quirks and foibles and feelings and fears are many – it's who we are, naturally – and of that we must never be ashamed. For the ultimate role that shame plays, in individuals, families and communities of every size, is to distract us from the redemptive, compassionate, hopeful lives Christ would have us lead.