

## For Our Kids: American Idol

Genesis 22:1-19

We've spent the last few weeks talking about what it means to be a church that is really FOR our kids. Two weeks ago I preached on the power of speaking words of blessing over our children. You belong to me. I love you. I am proud of you. And I KNOW you've been doing it because I've heard from you. But here's the greatest story so far. One mom was putting her two boys on the school bus. As they got on, she called out, "I love you and I'm proud of you." And her 5-year-old called back to her from the bus, "And don't forget, mom...you belong to us!"

Three weeks ago I was in London with our team attending an Alpha conference. It was London... which meant we did a lot of walking. Which was great. Mostly. I want to show you a picture. That little raised area is right in the middle of the sidewalk (or as they call it, "pavement")...in the daylight, it is very obvious, isn't it?

Well, at night...in the rain...it is not quite so obvious. We were walking back to the hotel, I noticed a friend coming toward us, waved at her, didn't see this death trap in front of me...tripped on it...and went down arse over tea kettle in spectacular fashion. In my defense...as Ellis will attest...I also did a tuck and roll and leapt back to my feet heroically! But it was a very embarrassing and unexpected interruption to our journey.

This evening/morning we come to one of the most unexpected...and disturbing... interruptions in the Bible. It was a guy named Abraham who was tripped up. You'll recall that God had called Abraham to leave his home, go to a new land and become the father of a new nation through whom God would bless the entire world.

Problem is...Abraham and Sarah were barren. And, they weren't exactly spring chickens, either. 25 years passed after God's call...and nothing had happened. And bupkus...no baby! How could God create a nation if he can't give them one little baby? But finally, the impossible: When Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90, they gave birth to a son: Isaac...which means "He will laugh." And they ALL laughed with joy. Suddenly, in this one miracle child, Abraham saw all of God's promises being fulfilled. Isaac would grow up and have many children. Within a few generations, a great nation. And some day, a Messiah. Salvation. A blessing to the entire world. Just as God had promised.

So...Abraham was walking on air! Until he hit a speed bump right in the middle of the sidewalk that knocked him to the ground. Listen to our story from Genesis 22:

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of

Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

This is a hard and disturbing story, isn't it? How could God ask such a thing? How could God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son? ESPECIALLY since Isaac was the key to fulfilling the promise that God Himself had made to Abraham. It's hard to get started on making a great nation if you sacrifice your only son.

This wasn't unheard of. MANY pagan religions of the time practiced child sacrifice. Worshippers of Molech built a fire inside a hollow bronze statue and then placed their babies in those arms. Ghastly! Child sacrifice was common in that region. But Abraham assumed Yahweh was different. Apparently, he was wrong. Yahweh, too, required the blood of children. Abraham might not have been surprised... but he must have been heartbroken.

Still, he obeyed...and in one of the most gripping Bible stories, we watch as the boy carries his own sacrificial wood to the top of Moriah, is bound up by his father, lain on the altar...ready to receive the knife. Only then...only when Abraham has raised his hand to slay his son, does God stop him. This was not a sacrifice. It was a test. An idolatry test...to see if Abraham loved and worshiped Yahweh God more than anything else in the world. Including his beloved child.

For the last four weeks, we have been saying that a church that does not prioritize children is a church in a death spiral. We love, evangelize and nurture kids because Jesus loved kids and told us we should, too. We welcome kids into the church because Jesus described them, in their humility

and smallness, as the greatest in the Kingdom of God. We teach our kids daily that there is only one God and we should love him with everything we have... because the “Shema” –the greatest of Old Testament prayers—trains us to.

Kids, kids, kids. We love them. We invest in them. But for this closing sermon in the series, I feel compelled to offer a warning: we are called to prioritize our kids...not idolize them. There are UNHEALTHY ways in which we can focus on our children which not only harm them, they damage the entire family. There is much to learn from today’s story about Abraham’s impossible choice. But at the core is this principle: nothing...not even our kids...is more important than our relationship with God. When we worship and adore anything or anyone...including our kids...more than we worship and adore God...that is idolatry. I want to look at a few ways that our children become our American Idol.

You idolize your children when you make them the most important persons in your family. The MOST important relationship in your family...is your marriage. Now I realize there are a lot of single parent families. I salute you! I know there are painful stories behind every broken marriage. No one hates divorce more than those who endure it... and thank God for grace, mercy, and second chances. But if you ARE still married, that relationship MUST be the highest priority in your family. The greatest gift you can give your children...is for them to witness your love and devotion to one another.

But it is easy for your spouse to play second fiddle...especially when kids come along. For many families, the children become the center of the universe around which everything rotates. But that is neither biblical nor healthy. Over the last thirty years, divorce in general has been on the decline...yet divorce among those 50 and over has doubled. What happens around that age? Empty nest! The last of your kids leaves home. The glue that held your marriage and family together is gone.

You...your marriage...is the Sun in your family’s universe. Your children are the planets that rotate around YOU...and are held together by the gravitational force of YOUR relationship and love. Trust me on this: no child EVER said, “I wish my mom and dad didn’t love each other so much so that they’d have more love and time for me.”

We also idolize our kids when we make their activities...sports, music, whatever...the center of our family life, often at the expense of our church life. I know... today’s sports world knows and cares nothing about the Sabbath. When I was in high school, games were never played on Sunday because of church. No more! The primary focus of Sunday worship for many families is their sporting activities.

I am not a legalist. I note that Jesus often condemned the Pharisees for their rigorous and joyless misuse of the Sabbath. But if church...if the spiritual nurture of your children is not a priority, it will always be displaced. Always. And I know balance is possible. I know of families for whom sports is a BIG deal...AND who model for their children that the worship of God with their church family is ALSO a big deal. As I mentioned in my blog on the death of Kobe Bryant, the most remarkable— and

under-reported aspect of that story—was that on the morning of the crash, before they headed to his daughter’s tournament, they attended a 7:00 mass at their family church where they received communion together. I know nothing about Kobe Bryant’s faith, but the fact that this sports icon hauled his teenage daughter out of bed early and took her to church on the day of her big tournament... I found that priority...that example of worship before sports, to be inspiring and astounding. I hope other parents follow suit.

On a related note, we idolize our kids when they dictate whether and where we go to church. One of our priorities at Chapel Hill is to make children and youth programs exciting and inviting so that kids are the ones pushing their parents out the door. But sometimes...in some seasons...kids decide they don’t like church anymore. And when I hear parents tell say that it’s hard to come to church because their kids don’t like it, I want to say...in fact, I have said..., “Do your kids like going to the doctor? Do your kids like going to the dentist? Do your kids always like going to school? Who cares whether they like it or not! We insist because it’s good for them and that’s what parents do.” Beth Moore is an incredible and well-known Bible teacher. She and her husband were once asked how they got their Junior High children to come to church. He said, “We get them out of bed, put them in the car...and take them to church.” We ARE the parents, after all...aren’t we?

We also idolize our children through extravagance. If you are horrified at the idea of buying your kids’ clothing at Costco or Target because it doesn’t have the right logo on it... and you can’t bear the thought of your children walking around in off-brand clothes... that might be a problem. And when we impoverish or indebt ourselves in this mad chase after name brand status...it is doubly foolish. Including, by the way, taking on the crushing debt of a big name university you cannot afford. I am the proud product of Yakima Valley Junior College and Cal State Bakersfield...and graduated debt-free. The recent Hollywood scandals in which celebrities lied and cheated to get their kids into prestigious schools reminds us how foolish...and how idolatrous... that behavior is.

We idolize our children when their physical safety is more important to us than their spiritual safety. We Americans tend to think that the physical safety of our kids is our number one priority. And...of course...it is enormously important! But their spiritual safety...their spiritual vitality...is WAY more important. In a moment, we will dedicate our Mexico Mission Trip. We’ve been sending kids to Mexico since 1990. And we’ve brought every one back, thank God. But there is...of course... always an element of risk ANY time we send our people to an unfamiliar place.

Every parent understands that. Every parent understands it would be “safer” if you could keep your kids in Gig Harbor, keep your kids in the house, keep your kids in bubble wrap. But they would miss out on the thrill...and the eternally important experience... of obeying and serving Jesus in his call to go into all the World. A century ago, missionaries and their families would ship their belongings to their foreign place of call in coffins instead of steamer trunks...because they knew they would die there. Their obedience to the call of God was more important than the safety of their families.

At the core of it all, we idolize our children when they ...or anyone... are more important to us than our relationship with God. I know...that sounds radical. But isn’t that what we mean when we declare that Jesus is Lord of our life? That he is MOST important; that no one...including our

children...including our spouse...is more important than our relationship with him? Of course, when we honor him with that priority of love...when he is the only one we worship... he longs and loves to give back to us all of those other precious relationships...which were his good gift in the first place! But if anyone ...including your kids... is more important to you than God... that is idolatry.

Those are hard things for us to hear. But here is the most striking and shocking part of this story: it is a reminder that the one true God only required human sacrifice one time...and it was of his own Son. Did you catch the glimpse of Calvary in this story? Did you hear echoes of words that would be spoken thousands of years in the future?

Does the prophetic nature of the story leap out at you?

"Abraham, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love..."

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON.

"And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son..."

SO THEY TOOK JESUS, AND HE WENT OUT, BEARING HIS OWN CROSS.

"Go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

AND THEY BROUGHT HIM TO A PLACE CALLED GOLGOTHA, WHICH MEANS "PLACE OF THE SKULL" AND THERE THEY CRUCIFIED HIM.

"Father, behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

FATHER, FATHER, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"

"God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WOULD NOT PERISH, BUT WOULD HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE.

Isn't that amazing? And the only thing more amazing is this: on Mt. Moriah, God reached down in his mercy and stopped the hand of Abraham before it drove the knife home. On Mt. Calvary, God watched as the executioner lifted the hammer. The angels poised, ready to spring forward at his command. To stop the arm. To slay the soldier. They waited for God's word to come, just as it had come on Mt. Moriah. But the word did not come. And the hammer was swung. And the nails drove home. And God the father did the unthinkable. He sacrificed his only son. For you. And for me. THAT GOD...the one who loved us THAT MUCH....is the only one worth worshipping.