

Truth or Dare: The Spiritual Life
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Stanford Memorial Church
19 June 2005

Happy Father's Day! I don't think the professionals who put together the lectionary for this morning concerning the abandonment of Ishmael by Abraham due to the jealousy of Sarah or the call of Jesus to love God more than family itself were thinking about a holiday of barbeques, neckties, and often awkward expressions of deep affection and gratitude towards those men who are our fathers or mentors or rocks in a hard world. The original Father's Day was invented around the turn of the twentieth century by a daughter. Listening to a Mother's Day sermon she realized the nurturing and sacrificing had come from her dad, who had raised six children alone on a farm after his wife died in childbirth.

However commercialized all holidays are good, because they make us stop—not just at Macys—and reflect on the costs and joy of love. These are secular “Sabbaths” in which the truth of life can sometimes be glimpsed, experienced, and expressed. Family relationships whether happy or sad are complex because we stand within them, our very emotional and intellectual structures and view of reality produced in part through these early intimate relationships. This is why we are saturated with advice about relationships, from Dr. Phil to Dr. Laura—and just like in religion too much interpretation begins to drown out the core of what everything was all about.

“Truth or Dare” is a favored game of adolescents: either answer the question or else do a “dare” to avoid answering (and now available on line!). This opposition seems to me to sum up some of our emotional and spiritual ploys around the deepest experiences of our lives: tell the truth only under pressure or else elect to do something more extreme to avoid it. Families, religions and societies seem haunted, if not demonized, by our reluctance to name “truth” and our love of “dare”, that is the extravagant actions which lead away from our hearts to emptiness and destruction: do many gifts show how much I love you or listening to you? Does enforcing orthodoxy or practicing violence glorify God or showing compassion to those who are different? Embracing the truth glimpsed on the Sabbath is a means of living a renewed life the rest of week.

Our readings this morning focus on family because the great good news of the Bible is that our spiritual life is woven and revealed in our family and everyday relationships, not outside or beyond, but here in the daily physical temporal events. Abraham is the ancient patriarch of three Western religious traditions. His actions of leaving his homeland, changing his name, and trusting in God's faithfulness are the bedrock of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity; however we translate these stories into our own communities and beliefs. The entire swing of the narratives in Genesis seems to be to teach Abraham to trust God in increasingly dire circumstances, culminating when he is instructed to put family members---both his sons Ishmael and Isaac-- into mortal danger. The stories in fact are focused on God and the character of divine faithfulness. It is not God daring Abraham to prove himself, but rather Abraham discovering the truth of

human existence—only in God do we live, move and have our being. “aman” in Hebrew means “to be true”, to be trustworthy, to be what you seem and your actions express your nature; to have faith then is to accept God is trustworthy and to live accordingly. Faith is possible because of God’s steady actions. So, when Sarah demands Ishmael be driven into the desert, God promises Abraham he will look after him—and he does. In the Koran Hagar’s faith is affirmed for she declares to Abraham that she trusts in God in the desert and is not afraid: she finds water.

Faith is trust, not blind obedience, a relationship based on the larger context of divine trustworthy actions. Abraham will take Isaac up the mountain because he trusts in God, and he will discover mercy not sacrifice. We are most “true” when we are attune to God’s “truth” that divine power and compassion are woven into the every day reality around us. Spiritual life is then the balance between our reliance on God and our independence: God’s compassion for us and our willing response of love. So in Islam submission is the recognition of God’s power and mercy and in Judaism the keeping of the covenant of the law expresses in minute detail the mutual bond of God and the people. We keep our promises because God keeps his. This spirituality is not melting into a cosmic all, but a mutual relationship dynamic and developing. This is the functional spiritual family which fosters confidence, trust, independence, love and joy. “We love because he first loved us”.

It is against this background of divine faithfulness and steadfast love that Jesus teaches a radical spiritual life in Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout his ministry Jesus pushes the boundaries of conventional religious life—do not look for lands or families or children or wealth. There is a huge irony in gaining “family values” from the New Testament. Radical detachment lies behind the defeat of the temptations faced by Jesus in the desert: give up anxiety about food, power, and physical security, and you will see the daily blessedness in your life. God’s faithfulness runs deeper than conformity, deeper than events, deeper than death. Things don’t happen for a reason, but God’s faithfulness and power endures in spite of everything. Expect persecution; expect dissension in the family; finally grasp that like the sparrows one is utterly dependent on the only one who is trustworthy. “Consider the lilies of the field was the only commandment I ever obeyed”, Emily Dickenson said archly, but perhaps this was most true. Or Gertrude Stein “When you realize how dangerous life is, there is nothing much to be afraid of”. These radical teachings of divine power and human trust became a universalized religion because God for Jesus is “Abba”, dad—who sends rain on the just and the unjust, and whose truth is enduring love as seen in the prodigal Son. God runs to meet you to welcome you home.

The stories of scripture draw us toward a deeper reality and a harder truth than we may expect from moral codes or ancient traditions. Like the deep mystery of God, scripture is not contained as a rule book, but flowers with unexpected meaning. Both of Abraham’s sons become fathers of great nations; Jesus’ radical trust leads to resurrection and the conversion of the Gentiles. The post-modern philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls this the “filiality of transcendence”, the recognition of all as children of God which embraces not only our tribe, but the stranger and the “other”. For him in the post-Holocaust world

the challenge for the descendents of Abraham the patriarch is to embrace the “Other” as a beloved individual, a face whose very difference calls for love. This is the mystery and miracle of fathers and sons—if in our families we accept and love those who are a part of us and yet are equally “other” as themselves, why not extend this into a larger world? Or if God accepts such difference and delights in creation, then why not extend this into our families? Difference need not threaten or divide us if we see God’s great goodness lying behind all existence. Spiritual life is the daily living of the truth of God’s love for all creation and the active power to sustain it. Today when you think of your father or uncle or mentor who did not let you go, who kept on your case, who urged you to dare to live your dreams, who accepted and empowered you even in difference, even when you seemed like strangers, you are gaining a glimpse of divine truth. And when you reach out today to love and affirm, accept and forgive, you are gaining a glimpse of the true life—the radical love of God which lies at the heart of all existence.