

“Antiheroes: God”
Genesis 22: 1-18; John 1:18
Andrew Foster Connors & Tim Hughes
8th Sunday after Pentecost
July 10, 2016

ANDREW: Maybe this sermon needs a prologue.

This is the final week of the ‘Antiheroes’ series that we have been moving through for the past six weeks. Each week we’ve dealt with another morally ambiguous character from the Bible, trying to learn from God’s habit of working through really flawed people.

But there has also been an elephant in the sermon, so to speak, that we are reluctant to name. Wrestling with each of these tricky characters raises a question that is frequently asked, but almost never in church. What about the character of God? Has God not had some shady moments in our long and twisted history?

TIM: We’re not supposed to ask that question. God is good, all the time, right? But then there are weeks like this past week. Weeks where tragedy stacks on tragedy and the injustice in our system seems so deeply ingrained that we can feel helpless to stop it. The question bubbles up, even if it isn’t spoken out loud. Where is God? What does it mean to be a person of faith in this present moment? I think, to echo Dan Rodricks column in the Sun this week,¹ if you are not feeling some despair at this point, you may be in

¹ Dan Rodricks, “Americans Should Feel Rightfully Despondent Today,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/dan-rodricks-blog/bal-americans-should-feel-rightfully-despondent-today-20160708-story.html>.

denial. In light of all that, here are two thoughts that may seem contradictory:

1. We have to be honest about the state of our hearts. We have to share our grief, our trauma, our anger, and our doubt. And secondly:
2. We have to be the church. We need to be together, and we need to remain open to a hope that is more powerful than the grave. It is in fact historically in just such times that God has appeared time and again.

ANDREW: So maybe it's appropriate that Tim and I are trying to preach this sermon as a dialogue this morning. Some of this back and forth may sound corny or contrived but in fact we *have* been dialoging, literally back and forth all week, trying to hold this faithful space between hope and despair. Our prayer is that you hear in this experiment the kind of holy conversations we all need to have in these difficult days - honest, hopeful conversations with ourselves, with each other, and with our God. Let us pray.

I: Opening Story

TIM: Ok. Sometimes you have a story that is so perfect for a sermon - relevant and kind of funny and a little poignant at the same time. And yet you are hesitant to share that story because you know it's going to make you look like an idiot.

ANDREW: Sounds like a story that the world needs right now, Tim.

TIM: Yeah, ok. You're probably right.

ANDREW: We're all pulling for you here.

TIM: I'm sure. Ok. Just bear in mind, this was a *long* time ago.

In my last church, up in South Boston, I was responsible for a one-day, Good Friday Vacation Bible School for neighborhood kids. We were in a dense city neighborhood that had tons of kids who took Good Friday off from school. And I was expected to run a fun one-day camp that also shared the story of the death of Jesus Christ.

ANDREW: The story is already off to a great start.

TIM: This was not my idea. I sort of did it under protest. But nonetheless, it was my job. Now, you all might know that I have this way of telling Bible Stories to children - sort of an improv theater style where I narrate the story and ask kids to play the various parts. I decided to do an improv theater performance of the death of Jesus starring neighborhood children. What could go wrong?

Anyway, I set up the stage with different areas - a garden of Gethsemane, an Upper Room, the Cross on Calvary. I cast the roles one by one, Pilate over here, disciples over there, soldiers - that sword is just a prop! When I asked for someone to play Jesus, this small Chinese kid named Xiao² shot his hand up. He really wanted the part.

So I was pretty much just making this thing up as I went along, and we made our way through the Last Supper, and the Garden, and the arrest. About halfway through the Trial I started to get a bad feeling. First, the obvious - this story is *wildly* inappropriate to act out with children. The kids

² Not his real name.

in the pews were yelling "Crucify him!" and Xiao looked nervous. I started to wish very badly that I had never started this play.

Secondly, and maybe worse, I began to realize that Xiao had not heard this story before. He came from an immigrant family, likely from another faith background. I realized that he was experiencing this in real time and did not know how it was going to end.

Now - 2016 Tim would never have started this play. 2010 Tim would have just stopped it right there, realizing that a half-mistake is better than a whole mistake. But 2008 Tim? He just felt like he needed to soldier on through.

I'll spare you the whole story. Suffice it to say, it took not just one but two milk crates to get Xiao high enough on the cross so that his little arms would reach the crossbar. I was so horrified by this point that I was speaking at the speed of light, just rushing towards the Resurrection. The kids seemed alternately shocked and delighted.

I pulled Xiao back down to the floor and asked him to raise his hands in the air, Resurrection Style. "The point is," I said, wrapping things up, "he was just fine. Juuuuuust fine."

ANDREW: Wow. You just made me feel so much better about my children's sermon on Rahab the prostitute two weeks ago.

TIM: I feel a need to say that Xiao is ok. I am Facebook friends with him to this day. But I will tell you why I thought of him this week. I was supposed to perform the story of Good Friday, the death of Jesus. That was my

intention, but in the process I inadvertently performed something more like *today's* story - Abraham and the Binding of Isaac. And I have to say - the result was really disturbing.

II: Unpacking Genesis 22: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly

IIa: ANDREW: You know, I'm pretty sure you aren't the only one.

TIM: You also performed a Death of Jesus play with children?

ANDREW: I'm pretty sure you aren't the only one disturbed by the Genesis story.

TIM: Right.

ANDREW: Basically, the upshot of the story is that God - the God whom we say is loving and merciful and forgiving, and kind - commands Abraham to kill his own son in order to test his obedience. Both Judaism and Christianity have had a tough time explaining that one.

TIM: As well they should.

ANDREW: The rabbis have more or less concluded that the punchline of the story is the opposite of what seems like the plain meaning - that human sacrifice is exactly what God does *not* want. Abraham's obedience should be commended in his time but not emulated, not when it comes to human life. Child sacrifice is prohibited by the Torah which was actually an innovation of its time (cf Leviticus 18:21 and Deuteronomy 18:10) because child sacrifice was practiced by Israel's neighbors (II Kings 3:27). So the story explains

how it came to be that Israel - unlike its neighbors - was prohibited from sacrificing its own children to their God.³

IIb: TIM: Ok. Those are all good talking points. And all respect to the rabbis. But--

ANDREW: --this is still a very disturbing story.

TIM: Yes. I know that Abraham was the father of the Jewish people and needed to be really really faithful so I suppose you could argue that he needed an extra-special, extra-difficult test to prove his loyalty. But what do you say about Isaac, you know? Just a kid. We know more than ever before how the world can be a scary, unsafe place for a kid. How the *church* can be a scary, unsafe place for a kid. It's hard to stand by this story - even if you can stand by some of the "Greater Good" type lessons that can be learned from it. I actually know a number of Jews and Christians - some of them pastors, who just reject it. They just say, "I don't recognize my God in this story."

IIc: ANDREW: I sympathize with their rejection. Here's a story at the center of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam ⁴ that suggests that God sometimes commands people to kill other people. Isn't that the root of so much of the violence in our world? The violence on our streets, in Dallas, in Baton Rouge, in Orlando, in Baghdad, and Syria?

³ Footnote Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 1991, p. 17-19.

⁴ The version of the Qur'an differs significantly from the one found in the Hebrew Bible. In the Qur'an, the command to sacrifice a "righteous son" comes to Abraham in a vision. Abraham then shares this vision with the unnamed son who agrees to accept God's will. After both have agreed to go through with it, God tells Abraham that the requirement has been fulfilled and a ram is offered instead of the son.

III: We Have To Talk About Sacrifice

IIIa: TIM: Not to mention modern day Israel and Palestine! It's so ironic. You know, I don't think we can understand this story without having a larger conversation about sacrifice. I was so excited to visit Jerusalem this past spring. It was just amazing to be onsite in these locations that I've only known from the Bible. One thing that I didn't realize until the trip was that Mount Moriah - the location of today's story - eventually also became the location of the Temple. The rock where Abraham bound Isaac is still supposedly right on top of the Temple Mount.⁵

To me, that is a very interesting connection, considering how sacrifices became such an important part of worship at the Temple. You know, standing there in the big plaza in front of the Western Wall, I could imagine the people lining up with all those animals, all the screaming and the blood. All in the service of the idea that the death of this innocent creature was going to help make up for the ways people have sinned. That was a standard ritual of the worship service, and to me it seems to come straight from this text. How different is that, really, from the idea that shooting someone you hate or fear will take that hate or fear away?

It's just a little depressing, you know, how this sacrifice mechanism runs through our religious tradition. It's the way violence is connected to redemption. It's like every Quentin Tarantino movie, baked right into our Scriptures.

⁵ This is also the rock from which the Prophet Muhammad departed the earth, hence the ongoing conflict between Muslims and Jews over this piece of real estate.

After this week, I am literally sick of violence. We come to church looking for healing and hope. And have to contend with this violence, even *here*, running through our story.

ANDREW: Yes, but isn't that sacrifice mechanism so true to what so many people in our culture actually believe? How many movies have come out in the last year that depict redemption through violence? How many wars have we fought in the last century and the early part of this one with that core conviction driving us to the killing fields? How many people are dead in Dallas or Baton Rouge or Orlando, or Baltimore because people believe that the only way to rid our world of injustice or unrighteousness is if somebody pays for it with their blood?

We might wish the Bible was an absolute rejection of violence in all forms. But it's more complicated than that. And its interpretation requires more from us. What interests me about the Old Testament is not that the sacrifice mechanism is there - almost every culture had one. What interests me are all the critiques of that system, the attempts to insert some restraints on that system, and even opposition that is named against that system all in the text.

TIM: I guess I can see that. Some of my favorite texts from the Hebrew Scriptures are when the prophets get up in arms about sacrifices and missing the point. Like Isaiah crying out, "What is the point of your sacrifices? I've had more than enough of your bulls and cattle. I take no pleasure in their blood." (Isaiah 11)

ANDREW: Or when the Psalms say, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken and contrite heart." (51:17) That's a powerful minority report that needs to be a part of this conversation.⁶

TIM: I like that the prophets are redefining sacrifice without discarding the word. It seems like those texts aren't disputing that faith sometimes requires sacrifice. They're just suggesting that sometimes we do it wrong.

TIM: Is it fair to offer this summary statement? That we find *self*-sacrifice to be a moving and central value of our faith? That we are supposed to give generously, maybe even our entire lives, so that we can love other people like God loves us? Sacrifice is one of our most admired values, even if it's not one of our most practiced values. We celebrate the soldier who dies to save the life of a friend. The single mother who works two jobs to keep her kids clothed and fed. Mother Theresa and Oscar Romero.

Self-sacrifice is a virtue. But sacrificing *others* - even for the greater good - that's a lot more complicated. And the further you move through the Old Testament, the more voices seem to be saying exactly that.

IV: "Now I Understand"

ANDREW: I wish that were always true, but I'm not so sure. Will Willimon tells the story of showing a film to some adults and children; a film reenacting the binding of Isaac. After watching the film, he and his wife,

⁶ Perhaps the most well-known text on this subject, Micah 6:6-8: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Patsy, divided the group by age. Patsy went with the children. "What does sacrifice mean to you?" she asked.

"My Daddy and Mommie are doctors at Duke,' said one third grader. 'They help sick people to be better. Every day they do operations to help people.'"

And how is that a sacrifice? Patsy asked.

'I go to the daycare center after school.' She said 'Sometimes on Saturdays too. Mommie and Daddy want to take me home, but they are busy helping sick people -- so lots of times I stay at the center. Sometimes on Sunday mornings we have pancakes, though.' And everyone," Willimon said, "from six to 11, nodded in understanding."⁷

ANDREW: Maybe obedience to God does require sacrifice, even the sacrifice of things that are precious to us. I think of the parents of Ruby Bridges who allowed their daughter to navigate the hateful mobs of white supremacists for a greater purpose.

TIM: I see that. But it's still hard for me to equate sending Ruby Bridges to school with preparing to put Isaac on the altar. One is a courageous act of justice that involves sacrifice. It's hard to see the greater purpose in the Isaac story.

ANDREW: Maybe that brings us to another dangerous question. Since today seems to be the day for dangerous theological questions, is it possible that God's mind changes over the course of the Bible?

⁷ "On a Wild and Windy Mountain," William H. Willimon, *The Christian Century*, March 16, 1983, pp. 237-8.

TIM: Maybe a *senior* pastor could say that, Andrew. I don't know.

ANDREW: It's a question worth asking, Tim. Look at what the angel says near the end of the story: "Do not lay your hand on the boy, for *now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son." Does God know more about Abraham after the test than before? Does God know more about sacrifice as our history progresses?

TIM: Well....maybe we just understand better what God means.

ANDREW: Maybe so. But would it be so dangerous to credit God with changing God's mind? It seems to me that we've got a problem in our world right now with people who think changing their mind is some kind of sin. Changing their mind on who is worthy to live or die, on whose life matters, or who should be welcomed or rejected in our churches or our country, on what God requires of them or of other people. Could the example of God's mind changing actually be good news?

TIM: Actually I see *a lot* of problems with that. If God's mind changes then how can we count on God to be "the same yesterday, and today, and forever," like the Bible says? Our tradition worships a God who is all powerful and all-knowing and unchanging, right?

ANDREW: I guess if we want to count on God to be the same as we *understood God* when we were 5 as when we were 20 as when we are 80, then yes, we can't count on *that* God. But that's not really the God of Israel, anyway, that's the god *we* fashion to cling to so *we don't have to ever change*.

What if what is unchanging is God's tenacious love for us? A love so tenacious that it's got its own Hebrew word for it - "hesed" - *steadfast* love. And what if that tenacious love is what prompted God to continue to struggle and weep and work to keep reaching out to transform us with that love despite our consistent mistrust and rejection of it?

It's like God's experience of *our* suffering is what keeps moving God to act. If we entertained that possibility for a moment in this story, God changing is less of a problem and more of a sign of God's refusal to give up on loving us.

What if God's steadfast love runs like a thread through the fog, twisting and turning through our messed up stories, leading us to higher ground? How many antiheroes does that thread wrap around? How many cultural confusions and human tragedies? When we aren't sure which end is up, I think we are wise to hold onto that thread. Like John says, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to God's own heart, who has made him known."

TIM: Ah, here's where we wind up talking about Jesus. You knew we would eventually be talking about Jesus, right? But yeah, I love that verse. It's a reminder that there is so much that we don't know. But Jesus is the thread that leads us forward.

ANDREW: Of course...some would say Jesus' death is the ultimate example of a sacrifice of a son by his father.

TIM: When I was growing up, Jesus' death was always the ultimate blood sacrifice. All the best Baptist hymns revolved around the blood, anyway.

ANDREW: I think we had the same hymnal growing up.

TIM: No doubt! Are You Washed In The Blood Of The Lamb?

ANDREW: Nothing But The Blood.

TIM: Covered By The Blood.

ANDREW: There is Power In The Blood.

TIM: So many songs. Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice. For many people that is the language that helps them understand the love of God. Ok. But I think it has to be said this - maybe this week it especially needs to be said - I don't think Jesus gave his life to reinforce the ancient myths of redemptive violence. What if Jesus gave his life to expose that system? To reveal it's empty core? What if Jesus gave his life to demonstrate that if we are always seeking the blood of others, the bleeding will never end?

ANDREW: It's like God is pleading with us to see the dead-end where violence always leads. My wounds won't be healed by wounding others. As hard as it is to believe that and then to live into it, God offers us a different way - even when we're especially afraid.

TIM: And that way doesn't accept injustice. In Jesus' death the innocent victim was never more visible. And in his resurrection, the powers of death and violence were defeated forever.

ANDREW: In Jesus, God's true nature is revealed, naming the violence of the system, *rejecting* the violence, and *dissolving* the violence with a love that reconciles enemies instead of destroying them.

TIM: That sounds nice, but it doesn't solve the deep problems in our society that have led us to a kind of despair this week.

You know what is making me angry right now? Thinking about black families sitting around kitchen tables all over America, trying to wrap their heads and hearts around the reality that their sons and daughters continue to be killed. Laid out on the altar for no good reason - for an America that doesn't include them. And we ask them to remain calm. To continue to sacrifice. And you look at this text where God seems to ask that kind of sacrifice - its too much to bear. And its not, I don't think, the heart of the Gospel.

You know what I think is at the heart of the Gospel? The disciples, sitting around their kitchen table with Jesus, trying to wrap their heads around his suffering and death. The reality that at our table of suffering, Jesus is present. The hope that in his resurrection, Jesus breaks the bonds of injustice and death that seem so strong right now.

When you know those things, even if everything else seems murky, you know enough to know that you cannot stay silent - not in the epidemic of violence that we've been experiencing.

We have violence in our tradition. There's no getting around it. But I believe that we also have this profound gift - the communion table. We gather around this table to be in solidarity with everyone who suffers. We

gather around this table because Jesus is always there. We gather around Jesus because he will lead us through this Valley of Death. Sometimes that is all we know. But on my best days I think it is enough.

(at this point in the worship service, we transitioned from the sermon directly to the table.)