

You Gotta Serve Somebody  
Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23

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Our bulletin cover this week features an individual standing in a body of water, bending forward towards the sun. To me it looks like this person is worshiping. Whoever they are, they seem to be in an attitude of worship. But what is this person worshiping? To whom are they showing such reverence? Who are they serving?

Are they worshiping the sun, the water, nature itself? Maybe it's the devil, maybe it's the Lord. Maybe they are giving their supreme loyalty to money or power, to fame or family. Maybe they are giving their all to their country, their emotions, their cravings. It's hard to say.

What is for sure and for certain is we all stand in awe, in reverence, before something. Bob Dylan was right, you gotta serve somebody. We all worship. But who, what? And does it matter?

Paul says yes, it does matter. It matters a lot. Paul is long and convoluted but his point is worshiping anything other than God is a sin and sin leads to death. Not just physical death. Emotional death, spiritual death. The death of our loving relationships, both in this world and the next. Sin leads to death on every level.

But worshiping God leads to eternal life. Again, not just physical but being alive emotionally. Being alive spiritually. Loving relationships nourishing us in this world and the next. Worshiping God leads to genuinely abundant life, both in this world and the next.

And so, the big question remains. Who you gonna serve? You gotta serve somebody. We all worship something or someone, even if it's just ourselves. How many people do you know who give ultimate loyalty and allegiance to their emotions, their cravings, their addictions? Who you gonna serve?

That question is very much at the heart of our Old Testament lesson. Who you gonna serve, Abraham? Who gets your ultimate awe and reverence? Who gets your very best self? Your son Isaac?

Your dreams of being the father of a great nation? Your desire to be celebrated and admired for millennia to come?

Or is it God? Is it God before whom you stand with awe and reverence?

We don't know what Abraham thought, but his actions are pretty clear. God calls. Abraham replies, "Here I am." And does what he's told.

It's a well-told story, nicely crafted. Reminds me of Ernest Hemingway without the bitter cynicism. The details are sparse, but the dramatic tension is high.

"Abraham, take your son, your son Isaac, whom you love" and sacrifice him at the place I will show you. You can feel the noose tightening and the anxiety rising. Abraham makes the arrangements and sets off. They walk for three days. (Hello, three days!)

Then, Abraham sees the mountain "a long way off". A long way off. "You guys stay here with the donkeys, the boy and I will walk the rest of the way." They set off. "Father." "Here I am." "Here's the wood but where's....?" "God will provide."

They get to the mountain. They climb to the top. Abraham builds an altar. He binds Isaac. He puts Isaac on top of the altar. He picks up the knife. The dramatic tension is at its height.

And of course, that's when the divine voice calls out, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am!" Stop! Put the knife down. It's OK. It's clear above all you fear God.

Let's talk about that word 'fear' just a moment. The Hebrew word is 'yahrey'. It means 'fear'. But it also means to 'revere'. To 'awe'. When you yahrey someone it means they have your ultimate respect. They are your most important relationship. Abraham puts God before anything else and before every other relationship. Abraham yahreys God.

I think Abraham intuitively knows what Paul knows. We all gotta serve someone or something. But only serving God leads to life: spiritual, emotional, loving relationships. We all gotta serve someone or something. But only serving God leads to life: spiritual, emotional, loving relationships, in this world and the next.

Abraham and Paul both know who to serve. I pray we do, as well.

Let me close with two observations. First, personally, looking back at my life, those times when my relationships were most at risk were those times when I had moved farthest away from God. God hadn't moved away from me. I had moved away from God. When God is my most important relationship, my other relationships improve.

Second, in our Old Testament lesson, God powerfully shows both Abraham and us that, though God has the right to change God's mind about creating a great nation, though God has the perfect right to demand Isaac as a sacrifice, God does not. God does not demand this of Abraham, or us.

We are to give God our complete and total awe and reverence, but we do not have to cancel our other relationships. We don't have to neglect them. God wants us to have healthy, loving relationships. We do that best when our most important relationship, our worship relationship, is with God.

God brings life – emotional, spiritual, loving relationships – God brings life through Christ Jesus our Lord, who, unlike Isaac, was actually sacrificed.

But Jesus was not sacrificed because God wanted it. Jesus was sacrificed because we need it. My friends, this is how much God loves us. Thanks be to God. Amen.