

We naturally turn to parents, ancestors, teachers, mentors, at times when we want some guidance. As followers of Jesus, we turn also to *his* faith, the Jewish faith. This morning's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is about Abraham, and I have some brief comments. First of all, Abraham and Sarah were imperfect, flawed humans like the rest of us. The whole story of Abraham is too long to re-tell here, but suffice it to say that it echoes other stories of dysfunctional families in Genesis with much sibling rivalry, or "battle of brothers." We remember the first set of brothers, Cain and Abel, with Cain "raising cain," killing his brother Abel. Abraham has two sons that are caught in a web of jealousy: Isaac from his wife Sarah and Ishmael from their slave-woman Hagar. Abraham gave his favor and inheritance to Isaac; Ishmael wandered in the desert, and became the father of many Arab nations who feud with the descendants of Isaac to this day. Isaac then has sons that feud, Esau and Jacob; note the famous story of Jacob tricking his old blind father to "steal" the blessing or inheritance from the first born Esau! One more example: Jacob has 12 sons, and Joseph is thrown by his brothers into a pit to die, but then he ends up becoming a leader in Egypt, saves his whole family from famine, and forgives his brothers.

In the story of "Abraham," meaning "father of many nations," I lift up to you one key line. When he was having his vision or voice from God, about blessings to come, Abraham "fell on his face" ... or "bowed down with his face touching the ground" (modern translation). An example of humility, and FAITH! Abraham is honored as a common ancestor of faith in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim peoples. Unfortunately, like Abraham's sons and grandsons, Jews, Christians, and Muslims continue to feud, a battle of brothers, or a battle of cousins in the story of Abraham's monotheistic faith. Good News: There are stories of reconciliations between some of the brothers in the stories of Genesis ... so we hope for stories of reconciliation between Jews, Christians and Muslims in our day!

That is actually a good point move on to our Gospel lesson for this morning. Jesus is all about healing, reconciling, peacemaking... though with Peter, we are not very happy about Jesus' method of healing and transforming our world. Jesus says to the disciples very clearly that he must undergo much suffering, and that all who follow him must take up their own crosses. Yes, in the Lenten journey, the preparation for Easter, there is much talk about "suffering" or "sacrifice," and the symbol of "the cross" of Christ. Not our comfort zone, but the truth of how the world works. Jesus is saying that in order to bring about change, he *must* face the powers in Jerusalem and in Rome, and that is why he will suffer and be killed.

To make the world a better place, a more peaceful place, we know that we need to say "Stop" to injustices and violence. There is hard work in trying to change systems and governments that oppress. So we cannot apologize for trying to change laws. There are many good goals that need the hard work of negotiation, compromise, perhaps even some sacrifice: Clean Air to breathe for all, Clean Water to drink for all, a Living Wage for all full-time employees, provision of Food and Health care for all; the list goes on and on, so we need to pray for all lawmakers, for compassion for those who suffer prejudice, for the most vulnerable; will we walk with them? try to understand and help them?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a resister in Nazi Germany, spoke well in his famous book, "The COST of Discipleship." To be a follower, a disciple of Jesus, Jesus says take up your cross, and you too will be persecuted, and you too will have to sacrifice something to work hard to better this world, to challenge the powers that keep people in forms of slavery. (I want to be clear that the kind of suffering that Jesus is saying we must face is not physical illness, nor natural disasters. We don't think God or Jesus would "send" illness or disaster to punish us, teach us, or make us grow.) His "take up your cross" is about *pushing back* against destructive forces in the world,

feeling the resistance and persecution from oppressors who don't want to change, and restoring and healing wherever possible.

The suffering and death of Jesus has been seen by many as part of God's plan of salvation, God *requiring* punishment or payment for sin, the blood of Jesus being the total payment. Marcus Borg and many other theologians find this theory unsatisfying, even distasteful to posit such a punitive God. Rather, as Borg asks, what if we see Jesus suffering and death as the depth of God's LOVE! It is not a punitive God who sends Jesus to suffer punishment in our place, but "a God who is passionate about the transformation of the world," and in Jesus was "willing to die because of his love for others," not because God "*required* his death as a blood sacrifice to transform and forgive the world. God can love us without payment of blood. Similarly, he says "it would be ludicrous to suggest that God required the deaths of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany, Martin Luther King in U.S, and Oscar Romero in Central America. No, they were killed because of their civil disobedience, their passion for a different and better kind of world. So also, Jesus sacrificed his life ... offered up freely as a gift to God – not because God required it, but because he was a revolutionary, a nonviolent change agent, filled with God's passion for a more just and peaceful world."

Let me underscore this progressive teaching about the "cross of Christ" with the writings of another of my favorite mentors in the faith, Richard Rohr. He says many of the world religions assumed we had to sacrifice, to spill blood, to get near to a distant and demanding God. But his Franciscan thought is rather that GOD is "spilling blood" to reach out to US! The cross is seen as symbolic of "God's outpouring LOVE." (Let's recall John 3:16: "For God so LOVED the world" that he gave his only begotten son). Rohr says, "I believe that we are invited to gaze on the image of the crucified Jesus (Rohr is Catholic after all), to soften our hearts toward all suffering... we gain compassion toward ourselves and all others who suffer." When we

remember that all suffer in some way, all have some sort of cross to bear, in compassionate love we can “Draw The Circle Wide” as the choir sang. Sometimes we may even “sacrifice” our own comfort zone, to widen our circle, to welcome the newcomer and the stranger.

For all manner of suffering, we can learn from Jesus to accept its reality, sometimes even suffer or die for the sake of Christ, for the sake of working for greater justice and peace in the world.

I found a song recently about the Cross of Calvary. I do not know the full intent of the poet; he could have meant the “cross” as punishment and payment for our sins; I hope it was more about the outpouring of God’s LOVE. He expresses well that to follow Jesus is to imagine walking where he walked: Bethlehem, Galilee, but also the “hill of Calvary,” which means being willing to suffer and sacrifice, for the sake of loving others. What suffering or sacrifice might we accept for the sake of Christ, for the sake of loving neighbor, and world? ... “I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked,” by Daniel Twohig, 1937:

*I walked today where Jesus walked, in days of long ago; I wandered down each path he knew, with reverent step and slow. Those little lanes, they have not changed, a sweet peace fills the air. I walked today where Jesus walked, and felt his presence there.*

*My pathway led through Bethlehem, Ah! memories ever sweet; The little hills of Galilee, that knew those childish feet; The Mount of Olives: hallowed scenes that Jesus knew before; I saw the mighty Jordan roll, as in the days of yore.*

*I knelt today where Jesus knelt, where all alone he prayed; The garden of Gethsemane, my heart felt unafraid! I picked my heavy burden up, and with him by my side, I climbed the Hill of Calvary, I climbed the Hill of Calvary ... where on the cross he died! I walked today where Jesus walked, and felt him close to me!*