

Independence Day is this Tuesday. For as much as I'd love to preach on America's birthday, we have a difficult reading from Genesis that is going to take our attention. Just in case you didn't hear the lesson, here is a summary: God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a "test". Abraham made the altar, bound Isaac's hands, and was ready with a knife when the Angel of the Lord told him to stop and told him to use the male lamb that was stuck in a thicket. Instead of reading this as God's "testing" of Abraham, I am going to invite us to read this story differently. My invitation to read it differently is based on how I experience God and experience God in families – God is the one who provides, who shows us love, and does not ask us to sacrifice our children. With that in mind, there must be a different way to read this story.

Here is how I experience God; and, it happened when I was drowning in a pool. That experience – meeting God while unconscious at the bottom of a pool – shapes and forms me today; in how I see God and how I see God in relation to us.

I was 14 years old. It was my last year as a camper at Camp Huston, an Episcopal Camp in the North Cascades of Washington State. That year, we invited twenty students from the Rikkyo Episcopal School in Tokyo Japan to join us for camp. They are Episcopalian and although our cultures are different, our faith, our faith tradition and our common prayers hold us together. The first day together we had a little free time and we found out the Rikkyo students know how to play soccer. It was ten Japanese campers against ten American campers. Yeah, you know how this ended – they beat us, by a lot. Later, we were in the swimming pool and found out that they know how to play water polo. That was a little more balanced. The next day, and all the days that followed, we integrated the teams so it was not a Japan/USA competition.

The Japanese campers came with different skills. One was a Kendo fighter – using a wooden cane. It was a thing of beauty to watch him perform his skills. Turns out later that he became a national champion. Another camper, Toshi, became my friend. That wasn't his real name but it's the one we could pronounce. He called me Day-bid. Not my real name, but it was the one he could pronounce. Toshi's dream was to be a professional sumo wrestler. He was built like one – like a refrigerator. We first met on the first day when someone had the great idea to make a circle in the field and try our hand at sumo wrestling. They put me – the tallest American – against him. Clearly, it was no contest and he was simply playing with me. We then had the counsellor step into the ring. No contest. We had me and the counsellor. No contest. We had three campers, two counsellors vs. Toshi. We could only corner him, but moving him, that was a different story. He was a fun-loving guy who loved to eat, laugh at jokes, and wrestle.

Halfway through camp, we were back in the pool playing water polo. I was a strong swimmer and was paired up against Toshi. He was not a strong swimmer. It seemed fair. I swam for his goal, caught a pass and dove underwater with the ball. I swam around him, came up, and made a shot at the goal (I missed because there was water in my eyes, and, well, it was cheating so it

would not have counted). Toshi suddenly swam off for our goal, he got the ball and I swam in front to block him. He dove down, like me. But, he couldn't swim with the ball. He was too, um, buoyant. I was scissor kicking as fast as I could; I was hovering above him. Toshi pushed off the bottom of the pool and shot straight up. The sound his head made hitting my nose was heard by everyone in the pool area. From what I've been told, my head snapped back and I slipped down into the water. What I remember is drifting to the bottom, looking up. I saw the feet of the swimmers, I saw the blue sky beyond the surface of the water, and a strange line of blood from my nose going straight up. I couldn't move but I was at peace. I remember not being afraid and the distinct feeling that Jesus was holding me in his arms. The God who I know, the God who I talk about, the God who I pray to, *The God Who* I preach on made himself very known to me at the bottom of the pool. I was full of love, and joy, and peace. Jesus spoke to me; but, not in words so much, as with love. The way you can feel loud music in your chest, I could feel his words in my heart. He told me I was fine, I was going to be fine, I am loved, and not to worry. The next thing I remember was being carried on a lifeguard's shoulder and Toshi's panicked face staring at me saying "Day-bid, Day-bid!" He had quite a lump on his head that we joked about later. It matched my swollen nose.

Now, in defense of the lifeguard crew at Camp Huston – of which I became a part of the following summer – two guards were in the water when they heard the sound. They were on my side within two seconds and pulled me up and out with the procedure used for neck injuries. But, for me, it felt like I was underwater for ten minutes... a long time, enough to feel the presence of my Lord and to have an experience with God that is with me to this day. When I pray, I pray in the sense of that experience of peace, joy and love. That's the God I know. When I use prayers in church that say Jesus is alive I say "alive" with more fervor than necessary because, well, I know it's true. He talked to me, he held me, he said everything is going to be okay; and, it was, it is, it will be.

That is why I have difficulty with today's lesson from Genesis. As I have come to understand God – the One who loves and frees us and gives us peace – this isn't the type of god to "test" us; especially with sacrificing one's own child. My experience makes me search for a different way to read this lesson which clearly shows, at least on the surface, that God tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice Isaac.

There are several ways to understand, or read, this story. Some people, in the American Christian tradition, sees "testing" as God who gives us tests with right and wrong answers. If we answer wrong, we get squashed. There is another Christian belief system that says "testing" is like an engineer who puts concrete or steel into a machine that applies pressure to it to see what the breaking point is. Neither of these two "testing" beliefs about God make me settled.

I did some research on how our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith read this story. According to my sources – mainly the Jewish Study Bible – the testing of Abraham is called, "The Binding". The climax of the story is not the angel of the Lord calling out to Abraham but rather when Abraham bound Isaac's hands – thus, it's called The Binding.

Here is some background that may help: this story, and largely the entirety of what we call the Old Testament, was written down during the exile period. In short, the Israelites formed one nation with King David. They kept the covenant with God and received prosperity and protection. In the series of kings that followed David, the Israelites moved away from the covenant. As a result, the northern territories were invaded by the Assyrians. Shortly thereafter, the southern territory of Judah was invaded by the Babylonians. Their captors destroyed the temple and brought the people into exile. It was then that the Hebrew Scriptures were fully written down. Here's something else: when the Israelites performed animal sacrifices they did not bind the animals. There is absolutely no record of human sacrifice. Thus, we are not sure why Abraham bound Isaac's hands. Except that when they were forced into exile, many had their hands bound. The story ends with hope – God provided for Abraham and Isaac lived! He was unbound and walked freely with his father. In other words, the knife that was going to sacrifice became that which freed him.

Rabbinic tradition asks of this story: Who was bound and who was doing the binding? They would ask who are you bound to and who is bound to you? Have you bound yourself to following God by living the Ten Commandments, by loving God with all your heart and caring for the strangers in the land God has given?

Is God bound to you?

When we celebrate Independence Day, the Rabbinic question is with us – to what are we Americans bound to? What binds us together? What does our independence bind us to? From what are we unbound?

During that water polo match, to what was I bound? You see, I was bound to the idea that I was not going to let Toshi score. More than that, I was bound to the ego of “he’s not going to score on me.” I unbound myself from the rules of water polo, from the basic rules of good sportsmanship, and was trying to dominate him by treading water and holding myself directly above him. ... and I got smacked in the face; hard enough to pass out and sink to the bottom. It’s like Jesus asked to what am I bound? I learned that he is bound to me – in love and joy and peace. If I am to bind myself to him, I need to send his love and joy and peace, and, at the very least, exhibit good sportsmanship.

Our binding to God releases us from the wrongs we have done and binds love and joy and peace in our hearts. We are bound then to share it. So, Abraham isn’t so much tested by God but rather was used to exhibit The Binding. Although the story happened a long, long time ago, the angel of the Lord is asking us today – to what are we bound and to whom do we bind ourselves to. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.