

When I was a kid, I figured out that I was naturally good at easing tension. I got especially good, at six or seven years old, at putting the adults in the room at ease “just by being myself.” I’m not sure how much “myself” I was actually being, I just knew it worked, and when it worked, rooms were more comfortable to be in and people more pleasant to be around. It says a lot that as a kid, I thought it was my job to get the adults to act right. And when I was trying to put all those adults at ease, I’d do things that make me cringe now. Certain kinds of jokes or affected accents that’d get a laugh out of my dad made everything easier. Not right, and not okay, but easier. It sure was funny to hear a seven year old echo a racist joke or affect a disability, and if it was funny for the adults, then the rest of the day’d smooth right over. Truth be told, I don’t remember if I knew I was doing the wrong thing. I just knew doing those things got the reactions I needed, so I kept on doing them. And I kept on getting laughs. And I kept on making it easier for the adults. After all, that was my job, to make things easier for them.

That kind of kid’s all over the place. The pleaser who just wants adults to like them, to love them, to value them and what they bring to the party, to want them around. It’s kinda bittersweet, the stuff kids’ll do to make people like them. Of course, we’re not just talking about kids, right? It’s bittersweet what adults’ll do to make people like them, too. To borrow a phrase, we’re all just kids grown tall.

Kids are often driven to places they know are bad or scary or dangerous. Sometimes they don’t know, or if they do, they think there must be a good reason. It must be important, even if it’s scary, for an adult to make ‘em do this thing. For example, it was important not to let the horse I was riding misbehave, because that would reinforce its bad behavior, and then adults would have a harder time with him. So when it reared up or ignored my tugs on the reins, I felt the guilt of failure. Nevermind that my stringy little arms weren’t stronger than a horse’s whole neck. It never crossed my mind why an adult would put me in that position. I just knew, even though it was scary, it must’ve been important.

In listening to that awful story from Genesis, something’s changed for me. I’ve always looked at it as being about Abraham and his trust in God and the unacceptable things he’s willing to do for his faith. But I’ve been wondering what all this might mean if it isn’t about Abraham’s faith so much as Isaac’s, Isaac’s faith in his dad. I wonder if he’s such a pleaser that he thinks this must be important, that Abraham wouldn’t make him do this scary thing unless there was a reason. Maybe he lays on the wood himself. Not exactly willingly, not exactly voluntarily, but because his dad said so, and he just wants his dad to be happy ‘cause everything’s smoother when Abraham’s happy. I don’t see this as a beatific scene. I see it as an enormous tragedy with far too much adult stuff dumped onto a kid, misusing the trust the son has in his father.

You know, it’s tempting to look at Isaac and see some connections to Jesus right before the crucifixion. A lotta theological hay’s been made about that, but I don’t buy it. Because when Jesus says “take this cup from me” and longs to avoid the sacrifice, he comes to his own conclusion, and I cannot stress this enough, *as an adult*. Isaac’s just a kid. Earlier that night, before Jesus prays in the garden, he shares that fateful bread and wine at supper. And when he does, he tells ‘em “This is my body, given for you. And this is my blood.” Jesus looks at those closest to him and offers the sacrifice of his own body and his own blood. It’s a world of difference from Abraham. Because where Jesus offers himself, Abraham offers someone else. Can you imagine Jesus looking at Thomas and saying “This is his body?” I know, the moral of Abraham and Isaac’s supposed to be about how faithful Abraham was to offer his “only” son, his greatest treasure. And that would be a loss for him.

But I think that difference plays out in most of our history. There are Christians who’re ready to lay down their life. And there are Christians who’re ready to lay down someone else’s life, to offer someone else’s

body, someone's else's blood. These days, maybe that looks like forcing kids into Conversion Therapy forcing them to reject their true selves. Or maybe it looks like stoking the fires of a holy war you'll never fight, a willingness to oppress someone else so that you might be faithful, a desire even to kill that you might live. Let me put that a little differently. Jesus does not ask us to sacrifice our enemy's blood. He asks us to sacrifice ours. There's nothing about Christianity that is low stakes. And there's nothing about Christianity that gets better when your actions make someone else suffer. We love others, so we give our own body and own blood for that love. We don't give anyone else's. Jesus doesn't ask for a child's blood, he asks that we give that child a glass of water.

I suspect right about now, most of us are thinking "why yes, of course. I would never." And, I'm afraid, we're wrong. We've spent a month talking about the implications of being Christian when so many Christians force sacrifice onto others. But we need to look at ourselves, too, otherwise we're just picking motes out of folk's eyes. Take my cell phone as an example among many. Seems like a neutral enough thing, maybe even good. Day-before-yesterday, I found a lunch spot to support a local business. Before that, I called someone in the hospital. Before that, I donated to a good cause. But it's not quite so simple. Because this phone came from somewhere. Let's start with tungsten, the mineral that makes my phone vibrate and extends battery life. Tungsten's mined by adult and child slaves. All that slave-mined tungsten, and all the other bits too, has to get put together somewhere. Foxconn, the company doing the manufacturing, strung huge nets around their factories to catch employees leaping from the building to escape abysmal working conditions. Now ya gotta buy that phone somewhere, Amazon, say, where they'd rather keep ambulances on site than pay for air conditioned warehouses. I'm not saying that it's our fault, not exactly, that phones are like this. I didn't design this system, you didn't create it. But everytime we buy, we support it, and we definitely benefit from it. And our benefit requires the suffering of somebody else. We don't mean to oppress, but we do anyway because the problem isn't just individual, it's systemic.

Thriving should not be a zero-sum game, but so much of our world's set up that way. And it doesn't have to be. Which is a real shame, because we've convinced ourselves that it does have to be this way. So we shrug our shoulders and say, "what're ya gonna do?" I don't know, the problem's far too big for me alone, but I'm tired of asking others, forcing others to suffer so that I can live. I'm tired of being in the world in a way that makes other people I've never known hate who I am because of what they -- who I've never met -- have to do for me. Maybe that facelessness is part of the problem. Maybe the distance makes using them more palatable, maybe it makes hating a little easier, too. It certainly makes ignoring 'em easier.

Jesus says, whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes God. We should hear that every time someone walks into St. Thomas', sure. But we should also hear its inverse. Whoever rejects anyone, rejects Jesus, and rejects God. Whoever enslaves anyone, whoever benefits from their suffering, whoever shoves them into confinement, does so to Jesus, and does so to God.

Now look, I know the world's bigger than any single one of us can take on. But the size of the problem shouldn't keep us from trying to be faithful. Begin by stopping what you're doing and stepping back. What do I take for granted? What do I ask others to do for me? What do I make others do for me? Who do I sacrifice? Who remains faceless? Where do I think God is, where do I want God to be, and where is God actually? If Jesus has anything to say about it, God's in the one that offers themselves freely, that sacrifices themselves freely. And God is in the one that stays the hand. That doesn't get us off the hook, it reminds us where we should be and what we should do. Because it's not "this is *your* body and *your* blood given for *me*." It's "this is *my* body. This is *my* blood. Given for *you*."