

You Promised!
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Aug. 18, 2013
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Texts: Judges 11:29-40
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Preface to OT Lesson: [When Jill reads the lesson from Hebrews, several men will be named as heroes or models of faith. One of them is Jephthah. He was a judge in Israel before the time of the kings, and he did win a battle. But his story is a little more complicated than you will see in Hebrews. Jephthah began his life as an outsider. His mother was not a legitimate wife of his father, and his half brothers sent him out of the community because they did not want him to inherit along with them. He built a career as a free lance mercenary soldier. When his home town got into a war with one of their neighbors, the Ammonites, the city fathers asked Jephthah to come back and fight them. They promised him a leadership role in the city. He agreed, and at first he tried to negotiate with the Ammonites, but they refused, so Jephthah and the Israelites went to war against them.]

SERMON

This is one of those times when it is difficult to say in response to a text, “The Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God.” This is a strange, violent, disturbing story about a father who kills his daughter to fulfill a vow he made to God. One author calls it a “Text of Terror.” It is difficult to see how the author of Hebrews could praise Jephthah for his great faith.

Jephthah was under a lot of pressure to succeed. . The text said that the spirit of God had come upon him. But maybe he didn't realize it. Or maybe the spirit didn't feel strong enough. He was afraid. He was in a battle that he needed to win in order to become the leader of his people. So he made a vow. "God, if you let me win, then I will sacrifice whoever comes out of my house to greet me when I return home."

Maybe you have made a vow like this. When the soldiers were waiting in their ships off the coast of France on D-Day, I suspect a few of them promised that if they survived this, they would become priests. A woman is afraid that she might have lung cancer, and she promises that she will quit smoking if she really has pneumonia. A teenager who has had a few drinks at a party gets pulled over, and as the police officer approaches the car window, the teen prays, "God, if you get me out of this, I will never drink again." Or perhaps someone you love is dying or in danger, and you beg God to save this person, and you say, "God, I'll do anything if my loved one survives."

Most people who make these vows do not take them very seriously. The soldiers do not become priests. The teenager goes to another party.

But Jephthah thought he had to be absolutely obedient. In the next chapter, he had no qualms about killing off 42,000 of his fellow Israelites in a battle over a minor disagreement, but here he felt compelled to keep his word no matter who got hurt. He had made a vow and he could not take it back.

One of the troubling aspects of this story is the way that Jephthah seems to blame his daughter for his own foolishness. She thinks she is doing a good thing by leading the parade in praise of her victorious father. But he tells her that she has brought him down and caused him trouble. This is called blaming the victim ... It may be that he assumed

the first thing he would see when he arrived at home was a lamb or a goat, or even a slave, but he must have known that he would be greeted as a conquering hero by a parade of women and children.

Jephthah was definitely in a bind. Making a vow to God was serious business. But it was also clear that the God of the Israelites had no interest in human sacrifice. But Jephthah cared more about keeping his vow than he did about the life of his daughter. Jephthah seemed to believe that God was more interested in unquestioned obedience than in sparing his daughter.

Jephthah's daughter seems to believe this too. She does not protest, although it is possible that she doesn't know exactly what Jephthah has vowed to do. She tells him that he must keep his vow! A number of commentators praised her actions. If she was willing to die, maybe Jephthah's actions were not so bad after all. So they talk about what an obedient, faithful daughter she was! Look how much she respected her father if she was willing to die so that he could keep his vow. How self-sacrificing she is. What a good woman/daughter.

But don't you wish she would say NO WAY, DAD! Don't you wish she would have gone off to the mountains with her friends and never come back?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a 19th century advocate for women's rights, was appalled by the daughter's acquiescence, and wrote this in a commentary: "The father owns her absolutely, having her life at his disposal. We often hear people laud the beautiful submission and the self-sacrifice of this nameless maiden. To me it is pitiful and painful. I would prefer that she offered a dignified whole-souled rebellion."

Unfortunately, the daughter does not rebel. Granted, she would not have had much choice. And she did ask for the two months with her friends. But I wish she would have fought back. I wish she would have valued her own life.

Some commentators have tried to soften the horror of the story by suggesting that Jephthah did not actually kill his daughter. Instead, he dedicated her to God, which meant that she could never marry and have children. This is why the story says she “bewailed her virginity” with her friends. In a culture where those were really the only options for women, that may have been a fate worse than death. Since she was the only child, Jephthah would never have any grandchildren. But most commentators think that he killed her.

We might ask where God is in this story. I’d like God to intervene and tell Jephthah that he was absolutely wrong. Think about a similar story, where Abraham is about to kill his son Isaac, and God stops Abraham at the last minute and shows him a ram in the bushes that he should sacrifice instead. Or what if God told the daughter not to go home after her two months in the mountains? But God does not intervene. And perhaps it is asking too much of God to come and fix it whenever human beings make bad choices.

There is a reason you’ve probably not heard sermons preached about this story. There is nothing uplifting or inspirational here. There is no obvious good news. There is no happy ending. But the Bible does not shy away from ugly stories. The Bible as a whole is a lot more realistic than the author of Hebrews. The story of Jephthah shows that the life of faith is complicated and messy. People make bad choices. They get themselves in moral binds.

Jephthah made a foolish vow. He should not have kept that promise. On the whole, it is good to keep the promises that we make. But sometimes, we also make foolish vows. We get scared, and promise God that we will do something that we cannot do. At other times, we make promises with the best of intentions, and then find we cannot keep them.

Your elderly parents press you to promise that you will take care of them so that they never have to go to a nursing home. And you promise. But they live into their 90s, and you are 70, and can no longer care for them. But you promised!

Two people enter into marriage with optimism and hope. They promise to love each other forever, for better or worse. But sometimes people change. The man who seemed so wonderful on the wedding day becomes physically abusive. The woman who seemed so perfect becomes an emotionally abusive alcoholic. What do vows mean in these situations? “You promised.” People often feel very guilty about breaking their vows and ending their marriage, even if the marriage is destroying them. But does God really prefer absolute obedience to human well being? When keeping a vow means living in danger, or endangering someone else, does God expect that the old promises must be kept at all costs?

These are complicated questions, and there are no easy answers. But God sometimes promised judgment on a sinful and rebellious people, and then changed course and offered mercy instead. If God can choose to be merciful, rather than rigidly follow certain rules, why can't Jephthah be merciful to his daughter? Why can't a miserable couple be merciful to each other and choose to divorce?

This is not a text or a sermon which ends with “go and do likewise.” Rather, we are learning from the mistakes of Jephthah and his daughter. God calls us to be faithful to the promises we make. But also to use our minds. Don’t make foolish vows. Don’t keep them if you do make them. And remember that mercy is more important than sacrifice. And finally, remember that our relationship with God does not depend on our ability ... or inability ... to keep our promises.