

I would never advise anyone to act the way God does in the story of Abraham. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son just to see what the reaction would be. Abraham has his son carry the wood of his own sacrifice up the hill, then an angel stops the slaying at the last moment. Imagine a woman saying, "My husband asked me to kill my child, and I was so afraid of what would happen to me if I didn't, that I had a knife in my hand before he stopped me and told me he loved me." This is heavy stuff, and I'd say you both need counseling--him for concocting the idea and her for her willingness to carry it out.

In spite of the obviously dysfunctional behavior between God and Abraham, this story still occurs in our Scriptures for a couple of reasons. One is that at the time of Abraham other religions practiced child sacrifice: They killed children in a religious ritual. What's significant in this story then is that Yahweh stopped a killing. Yahweh is a God who lets children live unharmed.

Another reason the story survived was for people to emulate Abraham. Abraham did whatever God asked. He was even willing to kill his son because he feared God.

OK, but it still leaves the initial problem unsolved--God teased Abraham to slay his child, his only child, Isaac, whom he loved, for whom he had waited 80 years. It's wrong to tease people that way. Today if someone said, "God asked me to kill," we'd know something was wrong. How do we account for this story? Perhaps our perception of God has matured, or perhaps God himself has matured. Asking for death as a proof of love is asking too much.

Now, this is what makes the death of Jesus so disarming. Again we meet a father who allows his only son to carry the wood of his own sacrifice up the hill. But this time there's no angel to stop the events, no ram to take the place of Jesus. Abraham agreed to the death of Isaac out of fear of God. The Father agreed to the death of Jesus out of love for us. St. Paul says the cross is a lesson in God's love: Out of love for us God did not spare his only son. It's crazy to think he'd withhold anything else--He's already given us the best he has. He has already given us Jesus.

Sometimes we're not sure about our relationships; we're not sure if love is really there and we're tempted to test people, or correct them, or put them down. It's human to want love, but it's Christian to give love. Some of our relationships put us on a cross. They create fear. Only love will cast out fear.