

Here We Are, Lord!

The first Hebrew word that I learned in seminary appears in our reading from Genesis. The word is *hineni* (הִנְנִי); it was our response when our brilliant professor, Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams, took attendance in class. *Hineni* means “here I am” but, like so much of Biblical Hebrew, it has nuance beyond literal translation. *Hineni* expresses the speaker’s whole-hearted willingness to give whatever is asked. When God calls, *hineni* is the only proper response.

This morning, God puts Abraham to an especially challenging test. Last week, Abraham obeyed God’s command and banished his eldest son, Ishmael. His younger boy, Isaac, is the only son he has left. God calls and Abraham answers “*hineni*,” not knowing that God will command him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham obeys, taking the boy up a mountain, tying him up, and readying him for slaughter. At the last second, God calls again, Abraham answers “*hineni*,” and Isaac’s life is spared. If we were to read on, we would learn that Abraham’s obedience pleases the Lord, who promises to make his descendants “as numerous as the stars of heaven” and to bless all the nations of the earth because Abraham obeyed God’s command.

What kind of father agrees to sacrifice his son? What kind of God commands him to do so? Bible scholars struggle with this episode, and none of their explanations entirely satisfy. Abraham is often praised for his obedience; some theologians argue that God was just teaching Abraham to trust divine mercy. But, as Professor Amanda Benckhuysen observes, Abraham’s relationship with God changes in this passage. Abraham learns not only to trust, but also to fear God. It’s a humbling reminder that, when God commands us, we’re wise to obey.

The question of obedience informs our Gospel passage. Jesus has called his disciples and they, like Abraham, have answered “*hineni*,” agreeing to go out and preach the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus has warned them to expect persecution; now, he promises great rewards to those

who welcome them. Without getting too wrapped up in vocabulary, the Greek word Jesus uses, *mikros* (μικρός), translates as “little ones” but doesn’t refer to children here. The “little ones” are those without power or privilege. In this case, *mikros* refers to the disciples, who came out of the working class. Householders who say *hineni* and welcome the disciples won’t gain prestige, influence, or wealth on Earth, but they can expect a magnificent reward in Heaven.

One of the many benefits of Jesus’s presence among us is that he, like Abraham, changed our relationship with God. Abraham taught us to fear the Lord, enriching our faith with ideas about obedience and justice. Jesus taught us to love the Lord, reminding us that God loves us and continually showers us with forgiveness and grace. Both taught us that trust is essential to a good relationship with our Creator. Personally, I like the grace-and-forgiveness part better than the obey-or-be-punished part but, as Paul observes, we can’t take grace for granted. Our love of God must always be mingled with a healthy dose of plain, old-fashioned respect.

That’s why it astonishes me when those who claim to be devout believers blissfully blow off our Lord’s commands. An honest reading of the Gospels demands our acknowledgment that Jesus has a special concern for the poor. Time and again, he instructs his followers to care for those who lack influence and wealth. As Jesus’s disciples, we too are called to open our doors and our hearts, welcoming those who have not been welcomed throughout our sorry history.

It’s never good when the Supreme Court hands me my sermon. Sadly, they outdid themselves last week. In just two days, and on the eve of Independence Day, the Court disallowed race-based affirmative action in college admissions, wiped out the President’s student loan forgiveness program, and authorized discrimination against the LBGTQIA+ community so long as it’s based in religion, of all things. Perhaps you agree with the Court’s decisions; six intelligent, well-educated, and prominent Justices do. But the cumulative effect of their rulings

will be to make it harder for people who are already victims of discrimination to live a decent life in our country. College degrees will be less available and more expensive. Bigotry will flourish behind the mask of self-righteous piety. People who are already in pain will suffer still more.

To follow Jesus, we must do what he says. If we don't want to act out of fear, we have to act out of love. Jesus believed that those who lack money and power deserve to be welcomed into the emerging Kingdom of God. It's important to dismantle the legal barriers that make it harder for historically disadvantaged people to live well in our country. But when our legal systems fail us, I don't believe we can satisfy Jesus by shrugging our shoulders and walking away. It's not enough to tell historically disadvantaged people that they should shut up and be grateful to have the same opportunities as everyone else has, because they don't. If life is a game, the American playing field is not a level one. Settling for a system that doles out justice without reference to reality is a little like that line from Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*: "what the heck, you're welcome, join us at the picnic – you can have your fill of all the food you bring yourself." I'm convinced that Jesus especially wants those who don't have enough to eat to be invited to the picnic. If everyone is willing to share, there's plenty to go around.

And that's where *hineni* comes in. The best way to show our love for Jesus is to step forward and say, "I'm here, Lord – send me!" Jesus wants us to welcome everyone, so we need to find ways to extend that welcome without relying on the courts to do it for us. Most of us don't have much influence over our political and legal authorities, though writing letters, signing petitions, joining in peaceful protests, and showing up at the polls every November couldn't hurt. But we can influence our culture with what we say online, what we do in public, and the choices we make about which businesses we support and which establishments we patronize. Our legal system has declared corporations to be people, so let's engage with them as if they were.

Corporate executives devote a lot of time, attention, and money to figuring out what the public will pay for – they’ll listen if we tell them. And if enough of us put our money and attention where our principles are, we can help create the welcoming society that Jesus wants regardless of what the courts have to say.

This gets harder when we recognize that, as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry reminded us in his pastoral message on Friday, everyone is created in God’s image, equally worthy and infinitely precious. Bishop Curry believes, as I do, that “God is always seeking to create a world and a society where all are loved, where justice is done, and where the God-given equality of us all is honored in our relationships, in our social arrangements, and in law.” If “all” really means *all*, we have to welcome everyone, including those whose values we despise. For now, though, I suspect that most of the people who support discrimination have a lot more doors open to them than the historically disadvantaged do. I’m pretty sure that we can’t change their minds and hearts if we never engage with them. And I’m confident that Jesus wants us to try, even as he asks us to welcome and protect those who are most in need of our care.

The Episcopal Church was born at the same time as the United States; our canons and customs were crafted by many of the same statesmen who wrote our national Constitution. Independence Day reminds us as Americans to recommit to our national principles of liberty and justice for all, not just for the well-to-do. God asks us as his faithful people to help bring in the Kingdom of Heaven, where everyone is loved and uplifted. It will be difficult, painstaking work that no one of us can do alone. There will be mistakes made, and setbacks, and many disappointments along the way, punctuated with some shining victories. When God calls us to do this holy work, our only proper answer is *hineni*. Here we are, Lord – send us. *Amen*.