

**The Dumbest People in the Bible**  
**Part 3: Jephthah and His Daughter**

Judges 11:29-40

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
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I

Let's just get this out of the way—yes, I have chosen a text in which a father kills his daughter.

If I had it to do over again, I probably would chose something safer and far less shocking to our sense of decency.

The story of Jephthah and his daughter offends us at every level.

That a father would recklessly swear an oath that leads to the death of his daughter is something we can hardly fathom.

And yet, like so many of the stories that Old Testament scholar Phyllis Trible, in her landmark book of 30 years ago, called “texts of terror,”  
there are important lessons to be learned here.

Sometimes in our attempt to do the right thing,  
we end up doing the wrong thing.

Sometimes we have good intentions,  
but end up causing more harm than good.

Sometimes we speak without thinking and hurt the ones we love.

Sometimes, believing we are right, time passes...  
and we discover that we were sincerely wrong.

## II

Let's consider this tragic tale in Judges 11.

As the chapter opens, the Israelites have been under the oppressive rule of the Ammonites for 18 years.

They cry out to God in desperation.

In the midst of their despair, they are willing to accept as their leader anyone who will deal with the situation at hand.

We see this tendency in our own day.

If the would-be leader promises that he alone can fix the problem,  
then it doesn't matter how realistic those promises are,  
or whether what that person is promising is even reasonable, feasible,  
or doable—  
a certain segment of the population that is frustrated and fearful will get on board,

This is what happens with Jephthah,  
but right away we learn that there is a serious problem.

In the patriarchal society of that time, prominent leaders were always introduced as the son of a respected male in the community.

In Judges 11:1, Jephthah is introduced as the son of prostitute.

When Jephthah's father dies, his half-brothers,  
the "legitimate" ones,  
don't want him around any longer.

Jephthah is shunned by his community, treated as an outcast.

He flees to the land of Tob,

turns himself into a kind of warlord,  
and gathers a small army of outlaws to do his bidding.

He has become a man to be reckoned with.

Meanwhile, back at home, a new threat from the Ammonites arises.

The elders of Gilead are desperate—  
so desperate that they are willing to welcome back the outcast.

The elders appeal to Jephthah to come and lead the fight against the Ammonites.

Jephthah shows himself to be not just a warrior of note but also a shrewd negotiator, as he says to the elders,

*“Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father’s house? And now you turn to me in your time of trouble?”*

The elders are desperate, so they make Jephthah an offer he can’t refuse:

*“Come lead the fight and we will make you head over all the people of Gilead.”*

Jephthah knows a good deal when he sees one, so he accepts the offer and becomes the commander and head over all the people of Gilead.

Jephthah then turns his attention to the Ammonite threat.

He again displays impressive diplomatic skills as he attempts to negotiate a truce with the king of the Ammonites.

Jephthah’s initial efforts are rebuffed,  
so he again tries to reach a peaceful accord.

He carefully rehearses the history of Israel’s entrance into the land of Canaan.

One thing has not changed over the last 3000 years—  
 people then and now have been fighting over that little strip of land between  
 the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

It is fascinating that Jephthah—  
 and by implication the God of Israel—  
 recognizes that other peoples have legitimate claims to the land.

*Verse 24: Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to  
 possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that the Lord  
 our God has conquered for our benefit?*

The current leaders of Israel and Palestine would do well to recognize that God  
 wills nothing short of peaceful coexistence among all peoples and nations, with the  
 result that all will have land, livelihood, and are able to live in peace.

So we can at least give Jephthah credit for trying to negotiate peace.

But in the end his efforts fail, as verse 28 bluntly states:

*But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent  
 him.*

### III

Jephthah gathers his troops and marches to war against the Ammonites.

While on his way to do battle, Jephthah utters his fateful vow to the Lord—

*“If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the  
 doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites,  
 shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.”* (Vss. 30-31)

Rather than an act of faith, such a vow shows that he is unsure whether or not God  
 will assist him.

He does not show the confidence that the Spirit of God should inspire.

His oath therefore is a foolish attempt to manipulate God to do his bidding.

*What comes to him freely, he seeks to earn and manipulate. His vow is an act of doubt, not faith; it is control, not courage. (Phyllis Trible)*

Jephthah goes to battle and is victorious.

He inflicts a massive defeat on the enemy and returns home in celebration.

And here I have to wonder:

what was he expecting when he arrived back home?

The outer courtyard of homes was often the place where animals were kept.

Was Jephthah expecting one of the animals—  
a goat or a cow or a donkey—  
to be at the door when he arrived home?

Jephthah arrives at home ready to celebrate his great victory.

And what happens next is heartbreaking.

Jephthah's daughter—  
his unnamed,  
unmarried,  
unsuspecting daughter—  
greeted him at the door with tambourine and dancing  
to congratulate him on his victory.

As soon as he sees her, he begins to cry out.

He blames her, even questioning why she came out to greet him.

But this young woman stoically says,

“If you made a promise to God, you must keep it.”

She only asks that she be allowed to go and spend two months with her friends and bewail her virginity—

in other words, mourn the fact that she will never marry and have children.

*So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. (vs. 38)*

And when she returns, we can only assume that Jephthah did according to the oath he had sworn.

Such a rash and foolish oath once uttered would be hard to back out of.

He would risk losing face before not only his friends, but also his enemies.

And here we can't help but wonder—

Where were the people who could have said to Jephthah,

*“You know, the God I worship would never ask you to kill someone on God's behalf”?*

Where were the people demanding that Jephthah's daughter not be harmed, instead helping him find a new way to understand God?

What was so wrong with the community's understanding of God that they allowed Jephthah to go through with this terrible deed?

I believe God's heart yearns for each of us to ask the same questions.

#### IV

So this is the first lesson we take from the story of Jephthah and his daughter:

**the importance of a new understanding of God.**

Behind Jephthah's vow is a false understanding of who God is—  
a God who can be twisted to our own ends,  
    manipulated into carrying out our agenda—  
a God who is like the Candy Man,  
    like a Pez dispenser,  
        who gives us whatever we want whenever we want it.

Our understanding of God needs to be greater than that.

We need an understanding of God as a God who loves and accepts all people fully.

They may be people who have been abused,  
    like the victims of human trafficking.

They may be immigrants, the poor, or the homeless,  
    like the tens of thousands of refugees  
        who have fled the five-year long civil war in Syria.

They may be people who have asked difficult questions.

They may be people who have been told they are not the right color,  
        the right socio-economic class,  
        the right look or the right sexual orientation.

But they are people who are loved by God just as they are—  
    unconditionally,  
        without reservation.

And they need folks like you and me  
    who will go and stand in the gap  
        and speak on their behalf.

Jephthah spent his entire life trying to prove himself—

prove to his family and his community that he was worthy.

Now he has a chance to make up for the past,  
 to prove that he is worthy,  
     to demonstrate to his family who had ostracized him  
         that he was not only a great leader,  
     but a son and brother worthy of love and acceptance.

And yet in making his reckless vow, he demonstrates not his faith that God will grant him victory over his enemies,  
 but his lack of faith,  
     his inability to trust God's promise,  
         his lack of confidence in both himself and in God.

Jephthah's inadequate and false understanding of God leads to a reckless vow foolishly made to win the respect of his clan and his peers.

**How great is the cost: the life of his only child.**

## V

And here is the second lesson we can take from this story—  
**how easy it is to be sincerely wrong.**

At some point in our lives we have all been wrong—  
 painfully,  
     tragically,  
         embarrassingly,  
     sincerely wrong.

At the time we were convinced we were right.

We were—at that moment—prepared to risk everything on our convictions.

But time passed, and we found out that perhaps it was not as simple as we thought:  
**they were not as wrong as we thought,**

we were not as right as we thought.

Elizabeth Eckford will always be remembered as one of the Little Rock Nine, nine African American students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

She was actually the first black student to try to enter Central High School on September 4, 1957, but was turned away by the Arkansas National Guard.

The desegregation of the school was accomplished two weeks later when President Eisenhower sent in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne.

A famous photograph of that September 4 event shows Elizabeth wearing a starched dress with a white top and a checkered skirt and sun glasses, as she walks with her head up, her back straight, walks with steely determination through an angry mob of jeering white faces.

One of those faces belonged to 15-year-old Hazel Bryan.

The photo shows her face contorted with rage as she screams racial epithets at Elizabeth.

Hazel went on to marry—  
she became Hazel Bryan Massery—  
a mother and a grandmother.

But always in the back of her mind was the memory of the angry, hate-filled girl she once was.

Forty years went by, and finally, after years of soul searching and anguish, Hazel Bryan Massery sought out Elizabeth Eckford.

Both women had grown and changed—there was no longer the hatred and fear of 40 years earlier.



How easy it is to be sincere but wrong.

How easy it is to equate wrong with right,  
hate with holiness,  
and murder with faithfulness.

It took Hazel Bryan Massery forty years to change.

You and I may not have the luxury of waiting forty years.

But every day God sends someone or something along our path that offers us the  
chance to pause,  
to rethink,  
to change our minds and our hearts,  
to repent and start over.

For Hazel Bryan Massery, it was a repugnant picture of an old self, now archived  
in American history.

For others of us it may be the words of a child or a grandchild who asks:  
“Why? How could you have been so wrong?”

Perhaps it is in hearing the story of a person’s pain—  
looking into his or her eyes,  
encountering a stranger who opens your eyes  
to the person you once were.

I know what you are asking right now:

Is it really possible to make amends for the wrongs we committed in the  
past?

Is it really possible to find forgiveness and redemption?

Will those I've wronged forgive me?

Will God forgive me?

Listen: God never turns away the soul that is truly and earnestly sorry.

So learn from the tragedy of Jephthah's mistake,  
and vow to think in new ways  
and act in new ways.

Because only then can we build a world where a daughter or a son will no longer be sacrificed for the sins of the parents.

Only then can we build a world that is a safe place of peace, harmony, and love for Jephthah's daughter and all the sons and daughters of God.

Amen.

Sources:

Jo Hudson, "Jephthah: Father Knows Best," sermon preached March 26, 2008, retrieved from <http://www.cathedralofhope.com/documents/sermons/20080326-7p.pdf>

J. Clinton McCann, "Judges," Interpretation (John Knox Press, 2002), 81-84.

Renita Weems, "Sincerely Wrong," sermon retrieved from [www.csec.org/csec/sermons/weems\\_4522.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermons/weems_4522.htm)