

Proper 8YA

July 2, 2023

Keating Series Part 3

The Four Consents
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Once at dinner, after I enjoyed my friend's story of her wine tour at the Willamette River, she leaned back in her chair, switched topics, and asked me, "So, what are you up to these days?"

I grew silent, took a faraway look, and said in a quiet voice, "These days, I am consenting to my nothingness."

She looked at me, her eyes grew wide with amusement, and laughing out loud, she said, "Only you, Salying, would say such a thing." We both laughed. I do recognize that I am not a normal person. But, I'm not the only one who would say such a thing. Thomas Keating would have said such a thing. Today, I will be talking about Keating's teachings on the four basic consents, consents that move into the divine life with Christ. I will be using the story of Abraham and Isaac's story on Mt. Moriah to illustrate his teachings. This is the third sermon in my series with Keating.

One of the words you will hear a lot in the path to transforming our emotional programs is the word, "consent." It is a powerful word. In fact, it is the only power we have to participate in our healing from emotional and spiritual wounds. It is the "yes" we are invited to say to God's invitation to love.

First a little review. In my previous sermons, I talked about how our emotional programs are the fabrications we've made, on a conscious or unconscious level, out of fear—the fear for safety and security for basic needs, fear for esteem and

affection in the midst of rejection and abandonment, and fear for power and control in a wily world. But, these programs don't really lead to happiness because they demand that the world change before we are happy. In fact, as we grow older, we reiterate these programs and become so identified with these programs that we think we are them. This is called the false self and it grows like an ingrown toenail. The true self is much more simple. It is the self that is not in pursuit of our fabrications, but finds its home in God—as the psalmist says, “to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

To find our true self is much more easily said than done. One way to begin is to consent. Thomas Keating teaches the four consents. They are these:

1. Consent to your basic goodness.
2. Consent to how beautifully and wonderfully you are particularly made.
3. Consent to your nothingness.
4. Consent to transformation—to see the nothingness of the false self.

The first two consents sound pretty good and maybe appear pretty easy. But nothing is as it appears in this list of consents. The first consent, the consent to your basic goodness is foundational because it is tested the moment we emerge from the womb. When we are hungry and cold and our security and safety are tested, we will wonder if our life is a good thing. If I don't feel good, is this body good? If I don't feel good, are my needs good? Is the world a good place, since I don't feel good? The first step to letting God heal us is to consent to our goodness as creatures of God, to recall that sixth day of creation when God declared all of creation, not just good, but very good. This consent is a consent to the goodness of all of creation, including the creepy crawly things, including our hunger and our need, including the person whom you dislike or hate. This consent is the antidote to the programming related to fear for safety and security.

The second consent is about saying yes to our growing and changing and consenting to what is going on as God unfolds our being before us. One of the

things that happens here is that our physical growth can happen faster than our emotional growth. For example, when we hit puberty, we experience sexual growth that often outpaces our emotional ability to understand it. So we are struck by ambivalence. This is even more so when our sexual and gender identity does not fall in line with our culture. In our ambivalence, we can suppress the full maturation of our sexuality. We call this state “being closeted.” Pride month walks out of the closet and celebrates this second consent. This consent is an antidote to the programming related to the primal fear for esteem and affection.

The third consent is the consent to our nothingness and the diminution of our being. The first two consents are related to growing. This third one is related to the other half of being created, which involves the loss of our faculties, dying and losing the ones we love because they are like us. We live in a culture that deeply resists this third consent. I remember when Dena Ware said once, “Have you noticed that in Silicon Valley, dying is a failure?” This third consent is an antidote to our programming related to the primal fear for power and control. Here we really consent to the reality that we are not God.

The fourth consent is the consent to transformation. Unlike the third consent, which relates to physical death; the fourth consent is about the death of the false self. Most people are more afraid of this death than physical death. Because the false self is the only self most of us know, to consent to this is to consent to an unknowing. People hate the unknown more than they hate death.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is a story of God calling Abraham to this fourth consent. But before I make this connection, I am obligated to say a few disclaimers. The story named by Christians “the sacrifice of Isaac” and by Jews “the binding of Isaac” has been hotly debated over the centuries. Without context, it is easy to conclude it is an appalling story of an abusive God and an insane Abraham. This story must also be read idiosyncratically; it is one of a kind. The prophets declared that God abhors child sacrifice.

If meaning can be garnered from this story, it must be read from its beginning, with the promise. In fact, we are given that caveat when today's reading about Abraham and Isaac begins with, "After these things..." What things? Well, many years ago, Abraham was given a promise—that Abraham and his descendants would be the means by which God bless the whole world (Genesis 12:3). Abraham and Sarah said, "Yay!" and immediately started to enact their programs for happiness. When Sarah was young and beautiful, Abraham pretended that she was his sister and gave her to be wife of a ruler to ensure his safety and security. Then, there was the barren womb and the whole Hagar and Ishmael mess. At each step God rescues them from their programs for happiness. Did Abraham learn something here? Maybe. Maybe he saw how God had rescued them each time and consented that God knew best.

Today, we witness a huge disruption to the promise—but this time not by Abraham or Sarah, but by God! It is said by the rabbis that when God sent his angels to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the angels were so appalled, they refused. They said, "Go tell him yourself if you want such a terrible thing." And so that is why we hear God talking directly to Abraham.

Today's story sets up an impossible problem: How could the promise to Abraham be fulfilled if Isaac was killed? In all the other situations, Abraham and Sarah felt they could assist the promise. But, here, there was no plan B Abraham could concoct. He either obeyed or refused. If he obeyed, he couldn't imagine how God could make things work—which was the most helpless, most powerless position to be in. What if Abraham decides he doesn't give a damn about the promise to the whole world; he just wanted his son to live. It was an option to refuse. That was his only power—consent or not consent. Such a terrible choice—Abraham needed help.

Consider with me the possibility that Isaac knew what was going on and he consented. Isaac, this quiet boy, knew the God hidden in the silence and trusted him. He could see that there was no lamb for the sacrifice. He could also see the grief of his father, how each step toward the mountain felt like lifting a boulder.

And when they built the altar and his father's hands trembled and his father wept, he could see all this. When they stood silent after everything was ready, there was no ram caught in a thicket. And when his father crumpled to the ground, I imagine then, that Isaac went to his father and offered his wrists to be bound. And Abraham looked at his son and said, "Run!" But, Isaac stood there and waited. When Abraham finally took some string and tied his son's wrists with no conviction, Isaac sat himself on the pyre. And right before Abraham pulled the knife, Isaac saw that something within his father died—and that was when the angel grabbed Abraham's wrist and knocked the knife from his grasp.

Who died on Mt. Moriah? It was not Isaac who was sacrificed. It was Abraham. He no longer could rely on the old markers for identity. Who was he? Now, the only response is silence. All commentary has ended for him.

Abraham's story is not a recipe for faith. We aren't supposed to imitate him. What I believe we can take from it is that we each must go through a struggle, sometimes immense struggle, before we can believe that God is never absent. The false self exists because of this perception of God's absence. That's why we feel we need to get to work on behalf of an absent God. Abraham calls the place, "The mount of God's provision," which is more accurately translated as "The mount of God's presence." Even though Abraham had been given a promise, he acted up to this point, like God was absent. Here, now, he comes to truth—God is never absent. But we must give up our false self to really see.

Each of the consents build on each other. You can't jump to this last consent till you make the others. If you skip, you'll probably lose your faith and toss God out and live in a permanent state of God's absence. But, if you choose to consent, it will lead you to true healing, true freedom, and, ultimately, your true self.