

God and Family: Some Surprising Words

Genesis 21:8:1-15

Matthew 10:34-39

Today being Father's Day, we are faced with two portions of scripture that cause us to scratch our heads! Hagar and Ishmael are expelled by Sarah and Abraham into the desert to die. Jesus talks about dividing family members from each other and loving him more than our families. These readings certainly don't fit in the category of "family values" as touted these days by those who obviously haven't read scripture very closely!

What are we to make of these readings? If we are willing to wrestle with the toughest portions of scripture, we can touch a deeper Good News than we imagined we would find.

God Includes What We Exclude

The story of Hagar and Ishmael really starts back in Genesis 16. There Sarah, then Sarai, who is still barren, shows amazing largeness of heart by suggesting that Abraham get Hagar, the Egyptian serving girl, pregnant. Then at least he will have an heir. Sarah, like us, has a hard time waiting on God's promises. She wants to make it happen. The pregnant Hagar takes a superior attitude toward Sarah. Not very mature, but she is pretty young. Sarah regrets the whole business and there is bad blood between Sarah and Hagar, and great tension between Sarah and Abraham. Ishmael is born.

In today's story, Sarah has become pregnant through God's promise and gives birth to Isaac. Isaac grows up and is weaned, probably around age three. By this time, Ishmael is the older brother. We don't know exactly how much older, but enough to be outside in the yard playing with Isaac, being a good big brother.

Sarah looks out her kitchen window and sees the boys playing together. She feels threatened. Her son MUST be the one to have the inheritance. She is going to nip this thing in the bud. She tells Abraham that he has to get rid of this woman and her son so that Isaac gets what is rightfully his.

There is no way to paint Sarah as noble! She exhibits some familiar human stuff. Fear. Jealousy. The desire to control things in our own favor. Our tendencies to draw circles tightly and expel those who are threatening in some way. Our attempts to take things into our own hands, to make something of ourselves, rather than attune ourselves to the movements of God's spirit.

Abraham is in a pressure cooker. He loves Hagar and Ishmael and feels loyalty to them. Yet Sarah has given him an ultimatum. He is sweating it out when God tells him to chill. He should go ahead and do what Sarah says. Isaac will bear Abraham's name. But God will also make Ishmael into a great nation. It's one of those situations in which we hear God's promise but are so confused and stressed out that it brings little comfort. We just keep putting one foot in front of the other in faith.

Abraham silently and faithfully carries out the plan trusting in God's word. We don't know what he is feeling. We can only imagine that he feels

confused, sad, and troubled. Our own hearts break as we watch him prepare rations for the mother and child, sending them out into the desert to probable death. In the end, God is true to the promise. God saves the child and his mother. The end of the story is absolutely clear—God is with the boy, who grows up strong and becomes a skilled archer. He marries an Egyptian woman. Ishmael becomes father to the nomadic people dwelling in the desert regions between Palestine and Egypt.

Our heads are probably spinning! What in the world is going on? What sort of family IS this? And what sort of God is this that would be party to the cruel expulsion of an innocent mother and child? Let me offer some thoughts.

Families, biblical ones and our own, are a mix of blessing and curse, love and hate, help and injury. None of us has come through our families unmarked by some measure of hurt or deficiency of love, stemming from the fact that we human beings all have stuff in us that can hurt as well as help, wound as well as nurture.

God seems to comply with Sarah's lack of compassion and jealous behavior, even approve of it. Sarah is doing it out of one set of motivations—her self-concern. God also has a plan for Isaac and Ishmael. God's plan is bigger and more life-giving. God is somehow going to be with Ishmael and his mother, we just aren't sure how. What we expel out of our smaller hearts God preserves, protects, and uses for life out of God's infinite compassion and deeper purposes.

Abraham is in a no-win situation. He is going to offend someone, hurt someone, either Sarah or Hagar and Ishmael. He is where we often find ourselves, not in a clear situation of right and wrong, but struggling in the gray and muddy areas where we sense nothing we do is going to be easy or necessarily THE right thing. But God's wider purposes and care enfold even Abraham's dilemma. Here is where I take the most comfort from this baffling story. Again and again in scripture, we read stories of human dysfunction and imperfection. God doesn't exert the kind of control that prevents us from being at our worst. But God responds to make something out of it. When Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, God doesn't wipe them out. God makes clothes to cover them, accepts them in their condition and moves on from there. When Cain kills his brother Abel, God doesn't wipe him out either, but puts a protective mark on him so that revenge will not enter the human situation. When Peter out of fear denies his association with Jesus, the risen Christ reinstates him and makes him a leader of the faith community. When we muck things up, when our faithfulness becomes little more than a confused plodding on, God is still working to bring new life.

God makes something out of the messiest of human situations, family, church, or otherwise. God's power of life works far beyond the boundaries and obstacles we throw in the way, whether we mean to or not. What or who we expel and shut out in our narrowness of mind and heart is taken into God's care and becomes beyond our knowing and seeing a further blessing to the world in God's purposes. This story can teach us humility. It can remind us of God's encompassing love and purposes that surround us in the many situations we find ourselves, when we don't know what to do, when we feel trapped by choices that all seem, if not wrong, at least not right enough. The story speaks the Good News of God who is always bringing life out of death, wideness out of

narrowness, inclusiveness out of exclusiveness, and hope out of despair because God IS the God of life.

Our Exclusive Love of Christ

What about Jesus' teachings? What we read were part of his words to the disciples as he sent them out by twos to heal and preach. He is warning them of the hostility and resistance they will probably encounter. He tells them not to be afraid but to trust God's care. Then he says those difficult words about family. He has not come to bring peace but a sword dividing family members against each other. No way is this a "family values" proof text! Neither is it an excuse to take a literal sword in our hands against others. Jesus says that no one who loves a family member or by extension any other human being more than him will be worthy of him. Love in this case means loyalty, what we commit our lives to, what we make the forming center of our lives. He's not talking about emotional hatred, and this text is not an excuse to haul off and finally "give it to" a parent, sibling, or spouse the way we've secretly been wanting to for a long time! Nor is it a justification for harboring resentments or grudges against our families. This is a call to a deeper kind of attachment.

These teachings remind the disciples and us that we belong first to God. By their love for him, their attachment to him, they are claiming their infinite belonging to God. No rejection or suffering they might encounter, no other claims on them by others, can come between them and their true identity and freedom as God's beloved children. Nothing is owed another human being except what comes from God through them toward others—the compassion, justice, and truth of God's love for all humanity. As the apostle Paul put it, we who belong to God in Christ "owe no one anything" except that kind love (Romans 13:8).

In these teachings is a liberating reality. All of us, each of us, belong first to God and not to each other or any human being. Our exclusive attachment to God in Christ frees us from the dependencies, expectations, and the emotionally or spiritually fused relationships we sometimes get into. This belonging first of all to God is the source of our freedom and a true loving of others, without the desire to control, judge or bind others to ourselves. It is the source of the slave's endurance and survival of the chains, beatings, and humiliations. It is the source of the addicted person's recovery and the abused woman's self-assertion. It is the source of the prophet's courage and the peacemaker's refusal of violence. It is the source of the abandoned, neglected, or abused child's healing. It is the source of strength, hope, joy and purpose for all of us. The sword that Jesus brings separates us from everything that would bind us to anything but our union with God and God's empowering love.

Finally, Jesus calls us to bear our crosses and follow him. He calls us to let go of our grasping of life in order to receive life as it is, as it comes from God. The cross we are to carry is the intentional life of living out God's love in the world through our own gifts and callings. Our cross, like Jesus' cross, is our faithfulness to our true identity as those who belong to God, who draw our life first of all from God, and who live out of the freedom that love brings, the freedom to love the world as God loves it. This cross will mean a kind of dying, dying to our old, inauthentic selves, the selves that are centered on themselves, seeking our own way, our own advantage, our own prestige. It means struggling

and sometimes suffering. It means first of all struggling with ourselves and going through the difficult transitions in our own spirits as we learn to let go of our own desire to control, to have things and people our way, and to receive everything as a gift from God.

This following of Jesus, this carrying of our crosses, creates for us a new family, the family of all who are actively and sincerely seeking to live God's love in and for the world. In Mark's gospel, Jesus is in a house teaching. His mother and brothers come looking for him. The folks sitting around him say, "You family is outside looking for you." And Jesus responds, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Who is my family?" He looks around at these folks who are listening intently to him, searching for a deeper life, and says, "My family consists of everyone who does the will of God." That's how we really belong to this world and to each other, through a shared commitment to following Christ, to seeking in our own lives what we are called and gifted by God to be and do. This belonging, this attachment, cuts the ties that would bind us to anything, including each other, that would keep us from being and doing what God has made us to be and do. This liberation frees us to truly love each other and the world.

I close with a Father's Day story. Years ago, just before my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer, I decided that I needed to tell him clearly that I loved him. My father was a very loving man but a man of very few words. I sensed his love and support, but I guess we just didn't say these things to one another. So I decided to change all that and take our relationship to a new level. I drove from Lynchburg to Salem to take him to lunch for the "big event." As we sat eating, I decided this was the moment. "Dad," I said, "I just want you to know that I love you." He was silent, looking at his meal almost as though he didn't hear me. Then he said, only half looking at me, "Well, I hope so." It wasn't a rebuke or a put down. It was just a simple statement, but not the one I wanted. I felt stupid. On the drive back, I found the humor in it all. What I had really wanted was to change my father. I wanted to create some ideal relationship that I had in my mind. But I had expected something from my father that he just wasn't comfortable with, that wasn't really him. At that point, I grew up a bit more. I stopped trying to change my parents and accepted the fact that they had loved me in the best way they could. I understood in a new way that I had to stand on my own feet, live my own life, not in order to get something out of them or other people or life itself, but to fulfill my potential as a unique creation of God.

If we are on a deepening spiritual journey, then we will be learning to accept life as it is and to take responsibility for our own lives and the way we live them. If our journey is centered on Christ, on following him into a deepening relationship with God, we will find our true selves and God's unrelenting care of us and the world. And we will discover the many ways that we can live out God's love and care for the world.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is a story of God's grace that embraces us when we are at our worst, our most confused, and our most exclusive. Jesus' teachings sound the call in us to an exclusive attachment to himself that creates in us an increasingly inclusive and empowering love for other people and the world, a love that comes from God.