

June 22, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Beyond Family

Genesis 21:8-21 *God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.*

Matthew 10:34-39 *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me....”*

Our readings this morning from Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew run counter to the “family values” we hear about from those who, it seems, have not read scripture very closely. The readings point us to something beyond the family, the reality we call God, which calls us to a greater, wider belonging and faithfulness. Families can be channels of God's love and purposes. They can also keep us from knowing and claiming our authentic lives. Ultimately, we do not belong to our families, but to God. That is our joy, our freedom, our hope.

Back in Genesis 16, Sarah (then Sarai), who is childless, tells her husband Abraham(then Abram) to have a child by the Egyptian serving girl, Hagar. This will provide an heir. Sarah wants to take charge of things, make things happen. The scheme backfires when the pregnant Hagar takes an arrogant attitude toward the barren Sarah. Now there is bad blood between Sarah and Hagar, and tension between Sarah and Abraham. Into this family Ishmael is born.

In today's story, Sarah has become pregnant, as God promised, and given birth to Isaac. Isaac grows up and is weaned, probably around age three. One day Sarah looks out her kitchen window and sees Ishmael “playing with” Isaac. The Hebrew verb means something like “mocking”, or as we would say today, Ishmael is “messing with”, or even bullying, Isaac. Angry and threatened, Sarah tells Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Here we see familiar, and painful, human stuff. Fear. Jealousy. Competition. The desire to control things, to make the universe bend to our egos. Our tendencies to shut out those by whom we feel threatened.

Abraham is a man divided. He feels loyalty toward Hagar and Ishmael. Yet Sarah has

given him an ultimatum. He is sweating it out when God tells him to go ahead and do what Sarah says. Isaac will bear Abraham's name and become a great nation. Ishmael also will become a nation. This is a call to trust, to open ourselves to a process, a power much bigger than we can see in the throes of our difficulties and dilemmas.

Our hearts ache as we watch Abraham 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 and saves the child and his mother. God is with the boy, just as God is with each of us. This is meant in the profoundest sense. Ishmael grows up strong and becomes a skilled archer. He marries an Egyptian woman and becomes father to the nomadic people dwelling in the desert regions between Palestine and Egypt. In Islam, Ishmael is one of the great prophets and an ancestor of the prophet Muhammad. Ishmael belongs to a Reality greater than that of his family. Most of us have known someone who came out of damaging family circumstances, yet was able to find and live a vital, fulfilling life. Maybe we are one of those.

The Power of Life we call God works beyond and beneath the boundaries and obstacles we throw in the way, whether we mean to or not. God's encompassing love and purposes surround us in all times and situations. The story speaks the good news of God bringing life out of death, wideness out of narrowness, inclusiveness out of exclusiveness, possibilities out of seeming impossibilities, and hope out of despair, because God IS the God of life.

What about Jesus' teachings? Jesus is sending out his disciples by twos to heal, teach, and preach. He has warned them of the hostility and resistance they will encounter. He tells them not to be afraid but to trust God's care. Then those tough words about family. He has not come to bring peace but a sword dividing family members from one other. This cannot be used as a proof text by Christians who want to pick up a literal sword, or weapon, to use against others. The "sword" is the cutting of our attachments to whatever or whoever keeps us from following Jesus in the life of faithfulness to God. Jesus says that no one who loves a family member or, by extension, another human being more than him will be worthy of him. Love in this case means what we commit ourselves to, what we make the forming center of our lives. This is a call to the deepest kind of attachment, to the journey of our true self and our life in God. It is an attachment that brings liberation.

These teachings remind the disciples, and us, that we belong first and ultimately to

God. By our love for Jesus, our attachment to him, we are on the journey of claiming our infinite belonging to God. No rejection or suffering we might encounter, no claims on us by others, including family, can come between us and our true identity and freedom as God's beloved children.

These are liberating teachings. Each of us belongs first to God and not to each other or any human being. Our exclusive attachment to God in Jesus frees us from the dependencies, expectations, and the harming relationships we sometimes fall into, or were born into. This ultimate belonging is the source of our freedom and 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, echoed throughout the slave songs and spirituals of African Americans. It is the source of the addicted person's recovery and the abused woman's self-affirmation. It is the source of the prophet's courage and the peacemaker's rejection of war and violence. It is the source of the 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 diminish our union with God and God's empowering love in our lives.

Finally, Jesus calls us to bear our crosses and follow him, and to let go of our tight hold on life in order to receive life as it comes from God. The cross stands for the intentional life of living out God's love in the world. The cross stands for a kind of death, dying to our old, inauthentic selves, the selves that are centered on themselves. It means the struggle of letting go of attachments that bind us, that keep us from full, free, and loving lives. I thought of this in particular last Thursday. Fifteen university students from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were with us to experience Camp Kum-Ba-Yah. They are a wonderful group of young leaders who are spending three weeks at Legacy International in Bedford, while learning about volunteerism and community service in this country. What better place than at Camp KBY! Our friend Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid, President of Legacy and spiritual leader of the World Community, a Sufi Muslim community, accompanied the group, and spoke to the camp at opening. Afterward, he and I retired to the Lodge for coffee and a visit. He told me of his deep worries about what is happening in Iraq, and of the 450 young Iraqis who have been through Legacy's programs and are now back in the towns and cities that are being overrun by violent extremists. To Shaykh Rashid, of course, the extremists are not true Muslims. I thought of the Muslim term *jihad*, and how most Muslims have the true understanding that *jihad* is the spiritual struggle with oneself to be faithful to God, not a struggle against others. It is the

same in Christianity, when some use Jesus' figurative sword as permission to take up a literal sword against others. It is easier to locate the struggle with someone or something outside ourselves, rather than within ourselves. The cross is about our own spiritual struggle to be reborn into our true, authentic, God-created selves, and to live in the world as those who know they belong to God.

This following of Jesus, this carrying of our crosses, leads us into 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. Those sitting around him say, "Your family is outside looking for you." Jesus responds, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Who is my family?" He looks around at those who are listening to him, searching for a truer life, and says, "My family is made up 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 seeking what we are called and gifted by God to be and do. This belonging cuts the ties that bind us to anything that would keep us from our authentic lives.

I close with a belated Father's Day story. A little over twenty years ago, just before my father was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer, I decided that I needed to tell him clearly that I loved him. My father was a loving man but a man of few words. I never doubted his love and support, but we just didn't say these things to one another. So I boldly 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 looked 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 a simple, honest statement...just not the one I wanted! On the drive back, I found both the humor and the truth in it all. What I had really wanted was to change my father, to create some ideal relationship that I had in my mind, that I thought I couldn't live without. However, 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 afresh that I had to stand on my own feet, live my own life, not in order to have the love of my parents or other people, but to fulfill my potential as a unique creation of God. Jesus' teachings can be heard as a call to stand on our own in our relationship with God, the love and power that is at the heart of the universe and of our own

lives.

Families are very important for the love, nurturing, and strength they can give. We can be grateful when families are healthy and loving. We also can acknowledge the harm they cause when they are not. The truly good news is that there is Something beyond the family, a steadfast love and power of life to which we each belong. It is the ultimate source our living and our loving.