

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH | Scripture & Sermon
June 21, 2020 – Third Sunday After Pentecost

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 21:8-21 (NRSV)

[Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac] grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.

But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

SECOND LESSON: Matthew 10:32-39 (NRSV)

[Jesus said:] "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

[Jesus said:] "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

*For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The Exalted Father

On Father's Day, it is appropriate to have as one of our scripture readings, a story about Abraham.

Abraham is the Patriarch who God revealed Godself too, convincing Abraham that he should have no other God, and then sending Abraham from the sophisticated city state of Ur where his father and his father's father had lived, into the wilds of Canaan with nothing but the dream that his descendants would outnumber the stars in the heavens.

Before he met God, Abraham had been given the name Abram by his father – which means 'exalted father.' But after meeting God, God gave Abram an even more impressive name. Abraham means 'father of a great multitude.' And God was correct. Abraham is the father of three great faith traditions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The three great Western Monotheistic faiths have their beginnings in Abraham. Moses is his descendant. Muhammed is his descendant. And Jesus is his descendant. In Hebron to this day, Muslim, Jews and Christians visit the Tomb of the Patriarch where Abraham, his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob and their wives Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel are said to be buried. God was correct, Heaven and Earth are full of his descendants.

So, Abraham is a very big deal as far as fathers go. He is important because he is the patriarch of our faith. When we sing a hymn like "Faith of our Fathers," we remember that we have the faith that we have today because of Abraham. He is also important because he is one of the first men in scripture who we can get to know. In the stories we have of Abraham and Sarah and their family, we encounter family systems with real people we can relate to.

And yet, when we examine these stories, Abraham the exalted father does not come across as quite so exalted. Abraham's faith is strong. His conviction is admirable. But the way he chooses to be a husband and a father are difficult for us to respect today. Abraham is a hero because he tries to follow and obey and constantly deepen his relationship with his God, but he is a villain in many ways when we look critically at the way he treats his wife and concubine and his children. He bears the sword that Jesus talks of. In his household, man is set against his father, daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. In our story today, Abraham's wife Sarah plots against Abraham's concubine Hagar, setting in motion the emotional and spiritual gulf between his two children, Ishmael and Isaac, that reverberates to this day in the rocky, uneasy and often tragic relationships which exist between Muslims, Jews and Christians. Being the child of Abraham was not like being one of the three children on the television show, "Father Knows Best." Father was faithful but not necessarily wise. Life with father was not peaceful. It was not safe. You could get thrown out into the wilderness like Hagar and Ishmael in our reading from today. Or, you could perhaps get stabbed to death on a mountaintop as Isaac almost does in next week's reading.

Abraham, the exalted father, has a messed up family. And, since this is so, we as his faithful descendants have some very real problems if we are to honour him. Indeed, there is a part in each of us, as we get to know Abraham that asks, "How are we to honour him?"

Our reading today from Matthew is equally problematic. In it, Jesus, our cherished Man-God who we usually think of as being a loving, comforting, peace maker, tells us in no uncertain words:

[Jesus said:] "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,

*and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household."*

This little bit of Matthew is probably one of the most difficult parts of the New Testament. Like the messed up Abraham we have in our Hebrew Testament reading, the Jesus we glimpse in our New Testament reading also seems a little messed up. Matthew 10 presents us with a view of Jesus in full apocalyptic mode – fighting the cosmic battle of good against evil which will lead to the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. But this won't be a simple, clean, antiseptic spiritual battle, Jesus tells us. It will be a messy civil war. There will be prisoners. There will be casualties. Families will fight. There will be division. Hagers will not get along with Sarahs. Ishmaels will not get along with Isaacs. And Isaacs and Ismaels will certainly not get along with each other.

These readings are traumatic and profoundly disturbing. We dislike them intensely. But we are not alone. Biblical commentators also hate these two readings. Abrahamic scholars gloss over the dysfunction of Abraham's family and concentrate on his faith. New Testament scholars point out that this terrible bit about Jesus only appears in Matthew, and that it seems to be in a section in which random sayings of Jesus have been collected. They wonder if maybe whoever recorded Jesus' words got it wrong. And in doing so, biblical scholars ignore two of the criterion they usually use to evaluate Biblical authority. They conveniently forget that if a saying attributed to Jesus is different from the Jewish traditions of his time and also from the early Church that followed him, they usually argue that it is likely to be authentic. And they conveniently forget that if an account of Jesus presents him in a negative, embarrassing light, they usually conclude that it is true.

Some scholars, however, valiantly struggle with these passages, convinced that they are true and important. They notice that when we turn to our Bibles we want to encounter Good News – we want to be comforted. They notice that ordinarily we only want to go to the foot of the cross on Good Friday. We want our church services to be ordered and beautiful. We want our faith to be an escape from reality. That when we come together in worship, we desire a taste of heaven on earth.

What we don't want is to open our bibles and read passages which remind us of what is. When Abraham throws Hagar and Ismael into the desert, he sets in motion the divisions between Muslim and Jew and Christian which persist to this day. The rubble, the death, the walls, the bombs, the famine, the widows, the orphans and the sojourners, the refugee camps we see in the Middle East every evening on the television, all started with Abraham.

In our Hebrew Testament reading from today, we read about not what we want, but about what is, what still is, about what was messed up then, and what is messed up now. We confront the truth that dysfunctional families lead to more dysfunctional families. We grapple with the wonderful promise and possibilities that a family can lead to – two children by two different mothers playing together happily – and the reality that even with faith, too often something altogether different can happen.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus paints us a picture, not of the kingdom, but of the truth of how we have fought for it throughout history. He prophecies. And it is true that today as we confront systemic racism, as we celebrate National Indigenous day of prayer, as we look at our world, the horrible violence Jesus speaks the truth of, is unfolding even as I speak – often in the name of faith.

Until we can grapple with what is, we cannot move to what should and shall be. Until we can admit that the problems in our society are closer than we would like, in our own families, in our own actions and personalities even, I believe that the Kingdom is not possible. Taking up the cross involves facing the truth not just on Good Friday but courageously facing ourselves, even if it means letting go of sacred cows like family, country, culture and yes, even creed.

We cannot let our love for these imperfect, fragile, potentially damaging institutions blind us to their need to be remade. There are things about them that will have to be given up, if we are to move forward.

When Jesus says, *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me,”* he is pointing out this hard truth.

Life as we know it needs to change. The ongoing killings of black and brown and First Nations brothers and sisters here in Canada, and the response of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations point this out. If we think that the life we are living now, and the way that we participate in Canadian family and society is life-giving, we risk losing our lives alongside our black and brown brothers and sisters. Something has to give. We must be courageous. Only if we can let go of what is not life-giving for Christ’s sake, we will find the abundant life we so want to enjoy in God’s kingdom.

Because if we can do this, I think that the problem of this scripture will go away. Abraham and Sarah and all the Jewish, Christian and Muslim brothers and sisters who came before us, will look down on us from heaven. And they will smile. And Sarah will laugh. And our exalted parents will give thanks that their descendants were able to do what they were unable to do in their lifetime. In doing more than they were able to do. In getting closer to the Kingdom than they were able to on their journey – they will understand themselves to be honoured.