

Sermon for June 21

The child 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. **Genesis 21:8-21***

Jesus said to the twelve disciples, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!"

"So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

"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. "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.” Matthew 10:24-39

Well, my goodness, we have a whole lot of family dysfunction going on in our readings this morning! We talk about family values, we debate what is causing families to fall apart, we even claim sometimes that all the problems going on around us are because young people were not raised right by their parents, or because people are not in church anymore, and if we would all just come to church and study the Bible, we would know how family life is supposed to be. And then we get today’s readings – seems even the biblical families had their share of dysfunction.

In many of the earliest stories of the people of God, we see not only family dysfunction, but also racism and privilege at work. Hagar, an Egyptian slave, and her son Ishmael were mistreated not only because Sarah wanted them cast out for her own personal reasons, but also because they did not belong to the favored tribe. The Hebrew people had laws about who was acceptable – basically if you were not a Jew, you were unclean and unacceptable. Abraham had more compassion than Sarah but he remained silent and let her dictate his actions. But God saw Hagar and Ishmael and intervened. We hear only part of the story today, and it’s a story rich with examples of God’s justice, mercy, and love despite human selfishness and injustice.

And then, in today’s gospel reading, Jesus doesn’t make matters any better, but instead seems to be fanning the flames of family feuds everywhere. “Do not think 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.” Really Jesus?

As they often do, Jesus’ words make us uncomfortable, just like they did to the faithful, religious people centuries ago who were offended by so much of what he said and did. So, we tend to dismiss what we hear in these edgier passages of scripture, telling ourselves, that was then, and this is now. But the fact of the matter is that we have a lot more in common with the people we read about in the Bible than we might want to admit. And when Jesus talked about families, he was not only teaching about our family of origin, but about the whole human family.

When the scripture challenges our privilege, we tend to dismiss it and find a nice comfortable passage to read instead. But the truth is, the word of God can be a sword and swords can create some unpleasantness. As professor of preaching at Candler School of theology, Dr. Thomas Long says, “The Gospel shakes up values, rearranges priorities, reorients goals. The gospel is not a salve; it is a sword that pares away all that is not aligned to the kingdom, and this often causes strain and strife in family relationships.”

In America, and in nations around the world, there is strife in family relationships and also in human relationships. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” If we have been reading our Bibles, then this should not surprise us, and yet it does, and we are indeed divided.

Three times in this passage Jesus said to his disciples, “do not be afraid”, even as he told them about all the fearful things that were to come, that would result from their faithfulness. Taking up the cross and following Jesus is the hardest good work we will ever try to do, and it will bring

division. When I was growing up, a friend had a sign at the front door of her house, just above the doorbell, that paraphrased Joshua 24:15, saying “Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord.” I always wanted one of those on my door; it sounded good and easy enough when I was ten, before I learned about all the other things in this world that could be served instead of God. Serving God entails taking up our crosses, and because we are only human, we will not always be very good at that.

So often, instead of taking up our crosses we turn off the news or refuse to talk about what is happening. In the short term this can be a healthy temporary response for our mental health, but it’s not a long-term solution. Instead of taking up our crosses, we will avoid conversations with our loved ones who think differently, or we will unfriend our Facebook followers who do not agree with us. Instead of taking up our crosses we will choose to do the very Southern thing we have done for far too long and just not mention the recent unpleasantness, all in an effort to make ourselves comfortable in the conflict.

But this is not about us. This is not about being comfortable. As Christians, as the people who walk in the way of Jesus, it is about *all* of us. As Christians we are commanded to love, and as Jesus commissioned at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, we are to go therefore, and make disciples of *all* nations. We are to love one another no matter the color of our skin or our education or our wealth.

We have some crosses to take up in order that all people, people created in the image of God and who are children of God, can receive God’s love and justice. God hears the voices of the troubled, and until we can also hear the voices of every troubled child of God, there will be suffering and division. Peace will elude us.

We have some crosses to take up as we make a commitment to talk less and listen more, to stay at the table in conversation rather than walking away, and to fulfil our baptismal promise to respect the dignity of every human being, with God’s help.

Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.” Taking up our crosses is not going to be easy, but we are not doing it alone. When every person is equal in God’s community, the swords can be put down, and peace will come at last. Amen.