

A Family Affair" a sermon based on Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86, Romans 6:1b-11 and Matthew 10:34-39 delivered by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs on Sunday, June 21, 2026 at the Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

There are probably not two more difficult passages to preach on than our Hebrew scripture and our Gospel lesson this morning! When I saw the lectionary, I thought, "Aaagh! I think I'll talk about something safe--say like Psalm 86." But then I realized once again that sometimes it is important to grapple with the scriptures, no matter how difficult they seem.

So, here I go! In our Genesis passage we wince as we hear God instructing Abraham to follow Sarah's wishes and make his oldest son, Ishmael, and his mother, Hagar the slave woman, outcasts in the wilderness. We also wince when we hear Jesus in our gospel lesson reminding his disciples that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword and to further go on to say: "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be the 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; . ." (NRSV) To our modern eyes and ears which are constantly being assailed with pleas to stand up for "family values," the biblical witness seems to fail us here, doesn't it?

But, does it really?

As always, we must remember that the Bible was not written in a vacuum, and so the context must always be kept in mind. Contextually, then, we must always remember that in the case of the Genesis passage, it was written about a place and time: the Ancient Near East during the early second millennium B.C.E., about four thousand years ago, when monogamy was not practiced and when the

tribal customs under which Abraham, Sarah and Hagar were conducting their family affairs are not anything like the norms of our current society under which we conduct our family affairs. Hagar, although a slave woman, was Abraham's legal wife, and had even been given to him by Sarah herself. This is duly recorded earlier in Genesis 16:1-3. So, Hagar's son as firstborn and the oldest could still legally inherit Abraham's legacy, if Sarah never were able to bear a son for him. But, Hagar was still a slave and Sarah, as the free woman and Abraham's "chief wife" was the "Head of the Harem," so to speak, and could wield influence over Abraham as Hagar could not.¹ Sarah, then, was well within her rights to ask Abraham to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael, a fact which makes us very uncomfortable, but which needed to happen for survival's sake. Sarah had to request this so that her own son, Issac, could realize his proper inheritance even though he was the second son. Sarah's fears of Hagar's claims on behalf of Ishmael were real in that cultural context and so she responded accordingly.

Although the Ancient Near East tribal context might throw us off a bit, it leaves us with a question. Is this narrative about our ancient ancestors really much different from what occurs today? Laying aside the modern laws against polygamy (although it still does happen), isn't what we have here in our Genesis passage the Ancient Near Eastern version of a "blended family?" Although Abraham was lawfully married to several women at the same time, unlike his modern counterparts, the family created by this situation is one of stepbrothers (and stepsisters too by other wives, but girls did not count in the story back then). The story also tells us something about the "blended" situation and what is the right thing to do when the affairs of the family come into conflict with the affairs of God.

What then can we learn from this difficult passage, taken in context, for our own family affairs today? What we can learn is that this Genesis passage is not finally a narrative which counsels rejection and abandonment of unwanted wives and children, although that is what it might look like on the surface. In fact, the passage, although it is extremely poignant when it speaks about Abraham's distress at having to cast out his son as we hear in verse 11, is not in the end about "family values" at all.

What this passage is really about is promise and fulfillment. God's promise and our proper place in that fulfillment. It is about God's mercy even when we do not follow God's will. For Ishmael and Hagar would not even have been a factor in this story, if Sarah and Abraham had **really** believed in God's promise to make them the parents of a great nation. For it was by skillful human determination and scheming, by both Sarah and Abraham, when they had given up on God's promise for them to conceive a child, which involved Hagar—actually used her—in this family affair, where Ishmael was born. Isaac, on the other hand, was the son of the promise. Isaac was the son God gifted to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Ostensibly, if Sarah and Abraham had not meddled in God's plan, none of this distress with Hagar and Ishmael would have to have happened because Abraham would not have even fathered Ishmael in the first place!

That was not to be, however. Above all of the things that God knows about us is the fact that we are human and that as human beings we WILL meddle! And so, finally, what this story is about is God's mercy and forgiveness, even in the face of our human tendencies to interfere in the divine plan. For God does not desert Hagar and Ishmael. In fact, God promises to Abraham that he will make a great nation" of Ishmael, as well. If God had been vindictive, he could have

withdrawn the promise from Abraham for his lack of faith. Instead, God makes Abraham the father of two great nations. God gives Abraham double his blessings! It is interesting, in that light, to note that the Judeo-Christian tradition, except for some future mention of members of his tribe, the Ishmaelites, and the provocative fact that Esau later marries one of Ishmael's daughters, drops Ishmael right there. And yet, the world does not. In this post-9/11 world it is especially important for us to realize that for hundreds and millions of Muslims, Ishmael and Hagar are central figures in their faith. In fact, the Koran speaks of Ishmael as a prophet in Chapter 19 verses 54 and 55. Pilgrims to Mecca reenact the distress of Hagar in the wilderness and the miracle of the holy well of Zamzam which is fabled to be the one which Allah pointed out to Hagar that then saved Ishmael's life. That Jews and Christians and Muslims see the same ancestor, Abraham, as the father of their faith is exceedingly significant.

In conclusion then, what does the experience of Sarah and Abraham have to say, if anything, to our New Testament passage this morning? To me the answer seems pretty clear. When Jesus says these difficult words, "I have not come to bring peace, but . . . to set a man against his father and . . . a man's foes will be those of his own household. . . .", (RSV) he is not counseling us that it is okay to foment sibling rivalry and family fights and to willy-nilly divorce our spouses. What Jesus IS saying is that, as Abraham and Sarah before us so painfully learned, if we set up humanly created family structures and rules and look to them as idols, such as the rights of the first-born in Abraham's day, and seek to manipulate God's will thereby, then we are doomed to failure. In our modern context, then, if the idol is keeping the family together for the sake of "family values," right or wrong, we are denying Jesus' teaching and example which commits us to follow greater laws: the law of love and the higher principle of justice.

In his novel, The Eyes of a Child, Richard North Patterson provides us with a poignant example of what Jesus is counseling against in the Matthew passage, when he warns us not to idolize the institution of family over against his law of love and justice. In the book an abused mother is telling her daughter, who also has married an abusive spouse, why she stayed with her husband. The mother tells the daughter about a particular night of terrible beatings and sexual abuse from her husband, the daughter's father, and then she says:

"The next morning" Rosa continued, 'I went to see Father Anaya. You remember him, don't you' Her mothers' eyes had opened again: the question, almost conversational, had a certain lethal quality.

'Yes', Terri said slowly. 'I was afraid of him, in his black robe and white collar. But he seemed kind enough.'

'Oh, he was very kind to me. He took my hand and told me that what Ramon had done was a terrible sin. We were in his chapel, where it was cool and quiet, and for a moment I felt better.' Removing her hand from Terri's, Rosa swallowed some coffee, wincing as if at its taste, 'And then he explained to me that the kingdom of heaven was God's but that in our home, the man must rule. If I obeyed Ramon in all things, took extra care not to anger him, then our home could be peaceful and happy.'

'I've done nothing to anger him,' I answered. 'He's just angry.'

'Then you must be sure never to provoke him,' he told me. 'You have a daughter now, a marriage and family, which are sacrosanct in the eyes of God. If you must do a little more than your part, then console yourself that it is for a reason, to strengthen your family and surround your daughter with love. In time, when you have more children, you will know that this is right.'

In that moment, I realized that I had ceased to matter. Assuming that I ever had."

The priest was wrong. Jesus words in our Matthew passage remind us of that. Abraham and Sarah were wrong to try to create their promised inheritance by human manipulation. Our Genesis passage illustrates that. But all of them, the priest and Abraham and Sarah, are judged by the very same God: a God of mercy, as our Psalmist reminds us this morning in v. 15: *"¹⁵But you, Lord, are a*

compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” and in our Romans passage in verse 11: “¹¹ *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*” This is the Holy Promise, and this is the path to Salvation. Amen.

¹Texts for Preaching Year A, Bruggemann, et al, p. 372.

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