

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Proper 7 Year A  
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Families, in whatever configuration, can bring out the best and the worst in us. We can experience love, care and trusted relationships or we can experience abuse of power, dysfunctionality, and unfaithfulness to the truth of goodness within each one of us.

It doesn't seem to matter how families are made; it doesn't seem to matter the gender of the members, or whether the family is blended or not, there is the potential for the deepest and truest love to emerge and shape lives positively. There is also the same potential for the deepest brokenness to emerge and scar members for life.

You may be thinking of families, perhaps your own or others, where things just seem to work: there are open and honest conversations, there is mutual love and respect, there is an ease and joy with being each other. You may also be thinking of families, perhaps your own or others, where things just always seem to be broken; lives littered with mishap and despair, relationships which have been so severely fractured seemingly from birth that they seem to be beyond repair, and where hopelessness resides.

Well, of course, it can be very interesting that this family that God chose, either literally or metaphorically, to be the birth family of God's covenant on earth, Abraham and Sarah, is fraught with dysfunction, jealousy, cruelty, and unfaithfulness to each other and to God's promise. I think there's some important truth to be revealed in that statement alone.

We meet Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar again this week in our stories. Last week, we heard God's promise to Sarah that she will indeed have a son, and we now know that she did, and because she laughed at this preposterous idea when the angel in the desert proclaimed her future, she named him Isaac, which means laughter, playfulness, joy. There's a celebration going on in today's story, one to commemorate and rejoice in Isaac's weaning from his mother, a loosening of the bond between mother and child, a separation, a freedom. There certainly is release in this transition moment, but I think too, for the mother at least, it's such a poignant moment, which holds some sadness to it, don't you think, especially when it's your last child? For you can no longer claim a bond or purpose that only you can fill in the life of your beloved child. In some ways, it's a similar feeling as when we hand our child over to be baptized, for then as well, you are acknowledging the substantial participation of a larger community in raising your child, and there's a power beyond you, the Holy Spirit, which will guide and direct your child's future. It

requires trust and courage to offer that which is most precious to you to something larger than this intimate bond with your child.

Isaac and Ishmael, Hagar's child to Abraham, the one conceived when Sarah took matters into her own hands to fulfil God's promise that Abraham would be the father of nations, were playing, laughing, running around as young children do. And something took hold of Sarah's heart – jealousy and fear: fear that, if Ishmael is behaving like Isaac's name (laughter, glee), which belongs to Isaac alone, will Ishmael next take the blessing that God told her belonged to Isaac, that of God's covenant?

Sarah decides Hagar and Ishmael must go, and commands Abraham to take care of it, so he gets up early in the morning, perhaps full of conviction and resolve to do what is right, what Sarah told him to do, or perhaps tumbles out of bed after a restless and heart-wrenching night and figures he may as well get this awful thing out of the way. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out, with sparse provisions for food and water, with no real chance of surviving, and prepare to die. Hagar cries out, not necessarily to God, for there is no mention of prayer, and she wails and sobs, and places her son far from her so she doesn't have to endure watching him die. Now that's an interesting decision, in some ways more difficult than the one Meryl Streep's character in *Sophie's Choice* had to make, choosing one of her children to live and one to die in the concentration camps, for she knew she was offering one a chance to live. But Ishmael, her only child will die before her, and she has chosen not to have that image branded onto her soul for eternity. I can hear her rapid breathing, as though she can't gather enough air to counteract the air that's being sucked out of her by her violent flaying of her body on the ground. I can also imagine the stillness that settles into her heart, not peace, but stillness for the pain is too great to bear. I can imagine all of this because when I was doing my chaplaincy training during seminary I walked into a room, with a beautiful paper butterfly attached on the door, in the Women's and Babies Hospital. There was nothing in my prior experience to prepare me for this moment. I saw a beautiful baby boy, with jet black hair just standing on his head, fast asleep in the basinet. The mother, a surrogate mother, sat frozen in her chair, still, as though suspended in time. I sat with her a long time before conversation emerged, ever so tentatively. We began the grief activities, of collecting the hand knit booties from her baby she could put in her keepsake box, to retain the newborn smell of her sweet little one. And then the wailing and crying began, just like Hagar's, as this young mother was watching her motherhood of this child die before her eyes, for this was the last she would look upon her child, and she made the choice to watch.

Before I knocked gently on that door, I must admit there was a part of me that thought, "Well, what did you expect? You knew this was going to happen. You knew you would be separated

from your baby shortly after birth. Your part of the story is over. That's what you bargained for." We may also have thought something similar about Hagar – "Well, what did you expect? You had no choice but to be with Abraham and conceive a child, for you were his wife's slave, but the child belongs to Abraham's family, not to you, for you own nothing. How did you expect this to turn out differently when Sarah had her own child?" We too may imagine saying this to a young mother, who is a victim of sex trafficking, "What do you expect? That you could raise this child as your own, or that this child would be protected?" We may have thought something similar this week, when we heard the account of the young American killed for his actions in North Korea, "how did you expect this to turn out differently?"

And yet, how can our compassionate hearts not meet these people in the complex layer that lies behind, or beneath, or alongside our rationality in these situations? How do our hearts not break for Hagar, cast out into the wilderness to watch her child die? How could I not have enfolded in my arms that young mother who was allowing a family to be born for others, but not for her. How can we pretend there are children in our societies who go unprotected due to the enslaved condition of their mothers? We can't and we shouldn't. We can't and we shouldn't dismiss the grief of anyone, whether there were actions or circumstances that should have foretold the impending despair.

Sarah is an interesting character. The translation of her Hebrew name is "in control." In this narrative, Sarah's dark side comes out, as she chooses, on her own, to banish and leave to their deaths, her rival, or more specifically, the child who in her mind is Isaac's rival. This passage of the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael is at the structural center of the Abraham narrative, which tells us this is important from a theological perspective. We may see Sarah's actions as a manifestation of her fear and sense of scarcity regarding God's blessings. To commit such a cruel act, she must have believed there was not enough love, grace, or blessing of God to go around. We see this all the time in family dynamics. I saw it when Phillip was 4 years old and playing on a t-ball team. You could see the parents leaping forward to make sure their child batted first, or had the attention of the coaches, or was front and center in the team photograph. Yes, even when our children are small, we exhibit control so our children get out front, get noticed, get more of the share of whatever seems important to us. We see it all the time when an elderly family member is rewriting their will, the drastic increase in bedside visits of one particular member, jockeying for the position of most favored one, for somehow, we like Sarah, don't believe or trust that there is enough for all, whereas when we are talking about God, there is actually more than enough for all.

So, we see the complexity of what love can do. It can cause us to not trust others or God; it can cause us to take matters into our own hands, rather than wait patiently upon the Lord; it can

bring out the dark side within us; it can do harm to relationships; it can instill a vision that is too small for the God we are in relationship with. We don't know how Sarah and God reconciled her actions. Maybe there was no need for it, as God tells Abraham to do whatever Sarah asks, even though her action is born from jealousy, even though her actions push others toward death. The only way God could have bought into this, from my perspective, is that God knew God could redeem this situation. God had already taken care of it. God already knew that Hagar would be reassured that Ishmael would be the father of one of God's great nations. Her son would live. That's all that we as mothers really want. The point of instruction here for us is that there may be times when we, like Sarah, act from a position of power and control, fear and desperation, and as much as we need to sort that out with God, God may be already working it out for us, redeeming our unfaithful actions, and bringing blessing upon the person we have wronged. For the young woman on whose door I knocked so gently on in the Women's and Babies' Hospital, I pray that God has blessed her in whatever way was right for her. There's no sense in my imagining what that would look like, but I have to believe that God heard her wailing, like God heard Hagar's, and gave her the promise of a blessed future.

Now, the other interesting thing about the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael being at the structural center of the Abrahamic narrative is the other place in the Hebrew Bible where this verb "casting out" is used, in the exodus story, as the Israelites are cast out from the under the oppression of the Pharaoh. This verb reflects liberation. What looks like certain death can actually mean life renewed. Hagar and Ishmael went back to Egypt, and we're told she found him an Egyptian wife. Hagar is the only woman in the scriptures who finds her son a wife, which meant she grew into a place of status and privilege and was able to secure the lineage of Abraham, upon whom God's blessing was bestowed. She was set free from a system which never would have regarded her role as important, her emotions as necessary, her wishes as vital. God took what seemed to be death and turned it into life, where God's blessing continues to extend to today. God started in our story today what God finished on the cross: life out of death.

Our story today reveals the complexity of life, the inherent uncertainty of how things will unfold, our struggle to control the outcome, the poor choices we make at times, the anguish we experience born from our own jealousy or feelings of inadequacy. We see the hard side of life. We cry out, sometimes to God, but not always. We rail at the way things are, and God figures out a way to redeem it all. God bears us through the worst, God offers us a well of living water which appears before our very eyes to nourish us, so that we can receive God's blessing, which comes to us anew through Christ, but which originated with the blessing bestowed upon Abraham and his offspring.

When we come to the altar rail, we can often experience the holy communion between the best of who we are joining with the overwhelmingly true presence of the goodness of God, and that feels right, for we are somehow infused with grace that allows us to become more of the best of who we are. However, there's another holy communion that I believe is equally important: that of uniting the worst of who we are with the truth God already knows about us. This is what the story of Hagar and Ishmael is about. For when we lay the fullness of who we are before God, Jesus' love can come dashing within. For Sarah, it was her love for her child, and also her smallness, her cruelty, her desire to hold more of the blessing than others. And yet God redeemed it all. This is what we celebrate in baptism. When I hand that baby back to the parents after the baptism, it is with the promise that God will make whole, complete, and perfect in our lives, all the complicated mess we may attach to it. Let us find hope in that blessing and promise of God. Amen.