

Sermon – Being Acknowledged
Sunday, June 25, 2017
Scripture Readings: Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:26-39
Sarah Iliff McGill, M.Div.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

First Scripture Reading: Genesis 21:8-21

⁸ The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.^[a] ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² 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. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹ 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.²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

First Scripture Reading: Matthew 10:26-39

²⁶ “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ 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.^[a] ²⁹ 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. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.³² “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.³⁵ 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; ³⁶ and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.³⁷ 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; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The title of the sermon: Being Acknowledged

The text: Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven.” Matthew 10:32

Let us Pray, Gracious God as we reflect on your Holy Scriptures may the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. AMEN

Our lectionary reading guides us to the story of Hagar. Hagar is a name to remember. Hagar did not build a boat like Noah, she didn't give birth to the Savior like Mary, or lead the Israelites out of slavery like Moses, but we need to remember her name.

Hagar is a hero of the Bible for her faith, her faith that makes her call out to God in her deepest suffering. From Genesis 16 to Genesis 21 her troubles are remembered in scripture. Hagar is an Egyptian woman that is a slave to the Hebrew woman Sarah and is at the mercy of her master's desires. When we acknowledge God is with us in our suffering, our suffering is more bearable. Hagar acknowledged God's presence with her and this made her suffering turn to hope.

Last week Dr. Kieffer talked about Hagar's masters, Sarah and Abraham as they heard the news that they were going to have a baby! A baby that would be a part of God's plan, news that they both laughed at (Gen 18). They hadn't believed in God's plan so much that Sarah had already handed her slave, Hagar, to Abraham to have a baby with Hagar instead. She decided to ignore God's promise to her and take matters into her own hands. Sarah is a smart, beautiful, and wealthy woman, yet she thinks she needs Hagar. Sarah wonders in Genesis chapter 16 "Perhaps I will be esteemed through her" (Gen 16:2)

Just so everyone is clear. This did not work! Sarah's plan caused suffering. Bad plan Sarah! Don't try this at home! This is not adoption. Hagar is not a consenting surrogate for Sarah and Abraham. Instead this is Sarah using her slave to get something she wants... hurting others as she does and the Bible confirms that didn't work for Hagar or Sarah for "When Hagar saw that she had conceived her mistress' honor was lowered." (Genesis 16:4)

This made for an unhappy home. Hagar's suffering also became Sarah's suffering. Sarah turned very harsh toward Hagar and in turn Hagar ran away into the wilderness for the first time. In Genesis 16, the part of the story we did not read today, God talks Hagar into returning to the protection of Sarah and Abraham's tents for a time and Hagar has faith and takes up her cross and returns to a very hard situation.

Hagar knows God is with her and that she is a part of a larger story. She has faith God is with her even in her suffering. This ancient practice of using a slave to have a baby inspired the modern book and now recently a TV series, The Handmaid's Tale. And in both the ancient practice and that modern adaptation, we can see how much humans can hurt each other. We can see how when humans tell other humans to accept suffering that it is wrong.

Each of us is capable of hurting others, of being like Sarah and using another for our own personal gain. But we do not get away with it, says the gospel. We don't get to secretly hurt others. For the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that God knows all, that "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known" (Matt. 10:26) can remind us of our need for confession and forgiveness.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that not only is Hagar's story remembered and acknowledged, but your life and story are known too. The good and the suffering, "And even the hairs on your head are counted" (Matt. 10:30). Your story is known, the times when you may have caused suffering like Sarah or suffered yourself like Hagar. God knows us and walks with us in all we do. When we acknowledge God is with us in our suffering, our suffering is more bearable.

To be acknowledged is so powerful. And to be ignored also has power. Each of us has been given this power to use on each other. From a loving parent that cheers on their child's accomplishments, to the angry friend that refuses to pick up the phone again and again. We can cause comfort or suffering. As the popular phrase goes: "Everyone we meet is fighting a battle. Be kind always." For God calls us to love kindness. (Micah 6:8). We can acknowledge or shun each other.

We can also acknowledge or shun God. Matthew chapter 10 has some quotes of Jesus that sound harsh on our Midwestern ears. May make us ask "Is this the Jesus I know?" For example, "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge.." (Matt. 10:32) OK... but then Jesus is quoted saying "Whoever denies me, I will deny.." (Matt. 10:33). OH! AND "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth, I have not come to bring peace but a sword. (Matt. 10:34)...But wait.

Did Jesus come to bring suffering? At a quick glance this passage in Matthew may sound like Jesus is the cause of suffering, not the relief of it. But this would be a misinterpretation, an incomplete understanding of the entire story. When we look at the entire Bible we see these words in a different light. For this is the same Jesus named The Prince of Peace, this is the Lord who says "Those who live by the sword die by the sword." (Matt 26:52) This is the same man who stops the stoning of an adulterous woman, our teacher that calls the little children forward, the good shepherd that looks for the lost sheep, the one that says our greatest commandment is to love God and Love our neighbors!

How do we approach these scripture words? Should we just skip over it and pretend Jesus didn't say that stuff? Well, no. We can't ignore the parts of the Bible we don't like. We can't cast it out into the wilderness. But what we CAN do is read it in context, study it closely, understand the cultural context and remember who Jesus was talking to then and how Jesus talks to us now. We can make sure we don't use the Bible like a hammer to cause suffering. We can pray that the Holy Spirit moves among us as we read the bible and make sure we spread the Good news.

The cultural context of the gospel of Matthew is that it was written in a time where Christians are facing persecution. A time when being a disciple was not easy. If you came home and said, "Mom! I am a Christian now!" It could be seen as a betrayal to the family. In making the decision to acknowledge God many first century Christians were causing a very real division in their families. And to this day, following Christ can cause divisions among family members and our culture.

For when culture says to hold onto revenge, Christ says forgive. When a family feud says anger, Christ says grace. Jesus is not talking about a sword used to bring oppression but freedom. A sword may be needed to cut out hate, A sword may be needed to cut resentment, and A sword

may be needed to cut that which holds us back from helping others. For to deny Christ is to deny those who are suffering.

We soon as a congregation are going to sing, “When Peace like a River.” Also known as “It is well with my soul” . This hymn is popular at funerals. A time of sadness when we must say goodbye to those we love. The hymnist knew very well that by acknowledging God’s presence he could find peace. TRUE peace! The lyrics

*When peace like a river attendth my way.
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot; thou has taught me say.
It is well with my soul.”*

Before writing these lyrics the hymnist Spafford suffered the death of his 2 year old son in the Great Chicago Fire. His other son at the age of four died of scarlet fever. His wife and daughters and him were seen by church to have such tragedy in their life because of divine punishment and were cast out. Spafford’s faith community failed him in this interpretation, they used the bible like a hammer. “When sorrow like sea billows roll.” Despite everything, Spafford and his wife leaned into their faith, and moved to Jerusalem.

There they helped found a group called the American Colony that played a critical role in helping those during and after WWI by running hospitals, soup kitchens, and orphanages. Suffering the deepest sorrows did not crush them because God was with them, because they did not deny God but instead turned to help others.

Without God, sorrow can destroy us. Through the story of the Bible we know that suffering is not triumphant. We are not left in the despair of the cross but we are given hope through the resurrection. God’s story brings hope into the deepest sorrows.

Hagar and Sarah are a part of God’s larger story of hope... the story of God’s promise to humanity; the story of God making a covenant with God’s creation. And in this larger, wonderful, amazing story... when suffering happens, God is walking with. After Hagar is cast out by Sarah, her suffering has grown to despair in the wilderness. She is out of water and her child is crying close to death, and she feels helpless.

I don’t know if there is a worse feeling than a parent unable to help your suffering child. As a mother I have only seen glimmers of Hagar’s despair and I pray never to know it more. Once when my son Scott couldn’t breath, when my daughter had a high risk birth, when a car came too close... these were just glimmers of Hagar’s suffering. And in her despair Hagar shows us what we can do, call to God. God hears the sound of the children, of Ishmael, crying. Ishmael means “God Listens”. Hagar’s eyes are open to nearby water and Ishmael becomes the father of a nation in his own right.

What if we too heard the cries of the children? What if we too had our eyes open to the wells of abundance that could save lives? What if in acknowledging Christ we sought out food for hungry children, medicines for sick children, comfort for lonely children, safety for children in war filled lands? You have the ability to do that; to make others’ lives better; to acknowledge the suffering around you and work to change it.

Today we are going to commission 24 teenagers and 11 adults to go on a mission trip starting next week. We will acknowledge them each by name as a part of our worship service to be an extension of this body of Christ to go out into the world to share God's grace. These students are NOT going to camp.

They are not going for the food, or the sites... They are going on a trip in attempts to make others' lives better; to acknowledge Christ. To learn about others stories and for at least one week walk with others in their suffering. It is our hope as a church that mission trips like these shape our young leaders into disciples. In watching these young people go out, each of us staying behind to feel empowered to do God's work here at home. We can remember those around us that need to be acknowledged and in doing so acknowledge God.

Remember the name of Hagar to help you in your work, a woman of strong faith that turned to God in her sorrow. And God listened and empowered her to help her son. It is well with her soul. AMEN.