

“God Hears You”

Genesis 21:8-21, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 3, Proper 7, Ordinary Time 12, June 21, 2020, dedicated to my father, the late Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. to my brother Paul Ahrens, to the fathers of my grandchildren, Luke Ahrens and Nathan Stadie, to the fathers on my staff, Darrell Cross and Mark Williams, to Peter Murray and to all dads everywhere on Father's Day 2020, and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Things are not always what they appear to be. What appears to be the end of a story, is only the end of a chapter. What appears to be the victory of evil over good, is only the pivot point for the victory of good over evil. What appears to be the death of someone is in fact, a new lease on life – a resurrection from the dead. If you haven't figured out that things are not always what they appear to be, you

have not been paying attention to your life, to your faith and to our Biblical story.

In Genesis 21, this storyline plays out in the story of Ishmael and Hagar. Ishmael is the oldest son of Abraham – born to Sarah’s slave, Hagar. When Sarah is unable to give birth, she directs her husband to the bed of her slave. Together, Abraham and Hagar create a beautiful son named Ishmael, whose name means, “*God has heard.*” Sarah is jealous of this child and Abraham’s love for his son and his attraction to Hagar. When finally, Sarah is able to conceive and give birth to Isaac, her jealousy boils over into wrath. She insists that Abraham cast Ishmael and Hagar out into the desert. And for some reason (that as a Father has always alluded me) Abraham gives in to Sarah’s demands – sending the mother of his son and his son out into the desert. It is the equivalency of a death sentence.

It isn’t long before mother and son are overcome by heat, hunger, dehydration, exhaustion and a lack of hope. They are dying. As she holds her dying son in her arms, Hagar can’t stand it anymore. She lays him down underneath a bush, crawls away and begins to scream and pray, “*Do not let me look on the death of my son.*” And he lays dying, and even though he says nothing that is written in the text itself, Genesis 21:17 says, “*And God heard the voice of the boy*” and God saves Ishmael and Hagar by providing a well in the desert.

Things are not as they appear to be in the desert of desolation. God hears the silent tears and silent voice of Ishmael, and the story – which appears to have gone off the rails against a slave mother and son – pivots to promise. God saves Ishmael to be the leader of a great people – the Arab nations, and in time, the followers of Islam. Ishmael connects to Mecca and there he constructs the Kaaba. It is in

Mecca that he is buried at death. Like Isaac, 12 tribes come from the lineage of Ishmael.

God never dismisses Ishmael. God is inclined to hear him. Although Isaac is “the chosen one of Israel” Ishmael is “the treasured one of the Ishmaelites.” God loves the outsider as his own beloved son. God loves this first born of Abraham, the slave woman’s son. Just as a Father remembers all of his children, God remembers and loves Ishmael.

This story hits home this Pride Week. Over Pride Weekend, I have been praying for all of you who, like Ishmael, experienced being cast out by family – in one form or another. Some of you, at way too young an age, were cast out and shunned by those who raised you in “God fearing homes.” You found yourselves in the wilderness of separation. I have heard many of your stories. I have heard your cries. I have witnessed your pain of separation and the scarring from abuse by those whom you trusted and loved. And I imagine, that buried in your life’s narrative, are the silent tears and silent cries from deep within which have never been heard by humans – but have been heard by God. God has heard you.

It is crucial to know and remember that you were never separated from God. Although people may have used a “Gospel Gun” to shoot you through the heart, that was NEVER God’s weapon. People abuse the name of God to hurt those they don’t understand, but **God is love.** God never abides in lovelessness. God is love. Always love. Our God, the God of Ishmael and Isaac, hears the silent tears of his beloved sons and daughters and sends angels of mercy to deliver hope and promise. Things are never as they appear at first. With God, resurrection is just around the corner from the

light of day! My friends, know that I love you and God loves you. You are loved by this family at First Church – now and always!

Similarly, those among us who have felt the pain of racial separation and discrimination and have experienced casting out from the racism of this nation have wondered, like Ishmael, *“does God even hear me when I cry?”* To you, I say, our God intervenes for the slave woman and the son of Abraham when all seems lost. While I will never be able to explain Abraham’s relenting to Sarah’s heartless appeal to cast out, I know that our God hears the cries of God’s children.

On this first full day of summer, I remember a conversation on a winter day with Adrienne Hood, the mother of Henry Green who was shot and killed by Columbus undercover police on June 6, 2016. He was 23 years old at the time of his death. Adrienne came up to me and thanked me for leading efforts to bring justice within the Columbus Police Department and in the city on behalf of the Black community. She said, *“Until your coalition of pastors came together, I felt as though all was lost. I felt like my cries were not heard. I felt like God had abandoned me. You have all restored my hope in the church and in humanity and my faith in God. Thank you.”*

Adrienne Hood is one of 28 families whose children have been gunned down on Columbus streets by Columbus police. From 2013 -2017, members of the Columbus Police fatally shot 28 people in our city – 21 of whom were Black. Not one officer has been found guilty in these shootings.

Recently, I heard Adrienne Hood speaking at the statehouse and realized her voice is being heard. I hope that changes made will eventually end the wrongful shooting deaths of others in this city by

our police. I pray the cries of their mothers will be heard by God and God will answer them in their anguish.

Yesterday, **the Poor People's Campaign, a National Call for Moral Revival** addressed yet another dimension of pain and separation. 43% of Americans live in poverty or extremely low income. That percentage was calculated before COVID-19 knocked the bottom out of our economy. It is probably closer to 50% of Americans now who live in poverty or with extremely low income. Hearing voices from 140 million Americans – or 43% of our nation's population who are poor or low income, I was moved by the cries of the poor in our nation and in these times. Let that soak in for a moment.

A 2016 study by the Federal Reserve reported that the top 1% of Americans owned 38.5% of the country's wealth. The projections are now that by 2021, 70% of the nation's wealth will be in the hands of millionaires and billionaires. 3.3 million people own 70% of the wealth. That leaves Do the math. That leaves 325,700,000 to share the remaining 30% of the wealth in our nation. If we had a pie and 1% of the people at the table got 70% of the pie, that would leave 99% of us fighting for a microcosmic crumb. God's children are crying out.

What has happened to us in this land of hope and dreams?

On Saturday men, women, youth and children from all fifty states united in a powerful virtual witness to end systematic racism, poverty, ecological devastation and the war economy. The call went out to Rise together and transform our economy so that the 140 million Americans have health insurance, a living wage (minimum of \$15/hour), clean water, voting protections and more in our great nation

that was established under the belief that “all are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights – among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

If we are to change the narrative in our lives and in our nation, we have to change the narrators. If the narrator is telling us that the economy is great, all is well, and we have never been better, then we have to change the narrator because the narrator is speaking fiction – not truth and not facts. The narrators I heard yesterday in the Poor People’s Campaign were saying we already have the resources in our nation to address the needs of the poor. The question is – do we have the desire to make things right? It is time to change the narrator. It is time to tell our story from the vantage point of Ishmael and Hagar – and our God who wants to right these wrongs.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus complicates our narrative even further. He tells us the Gospel is inherently divisive. He says we should not be surprised when people fight about it. Jesus puts it this way, “*Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” (Not what we expect from the Prince of Peace.) He continues, “*I come to set a man against his father (who picked this text for Father’s Day?), and a daughter against her mother . . . whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; 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 . . .*”

As troubling as this may sound, this was Jesus’ clear and present way of redefining the family. For Jesus, family was not just a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you or who you look like or sound like. He was concerned about whose image you

were created in. He wasn't concerned about your street address or whose prestigious last name you carry. He came from a family which included those who had no address and whose names were forgotten to all but God.

His family was made up of mutts. They were "tax collectors, lepers, Roman centurions, scruffy looking men who fished for a living and ladies in robes made of gold brocade and hordes of squealing children." In fact, there was no family tree in Jesus' Holy Bible. As much as his ancestors mattered to him, his was more like a family forest than a family tree (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p. 18).

In the market and advertise-driven world of the "Purpose Driven Church," pastors and lay people today are trained to seek like-minded, similar-looking, homogenous gatherings of people to bring to church and to make the next generation of Christians. We are told, churches grow from likeness. But I have trouble with this. I believe Jesus would have breathed fire in reaction to the market driven church. **I believe Christians grow from the Love of God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.** Once we, as his followers, have grown from His light, life, and love, then our churches will grow. And clearly, to grow in Jesus (according to Jesus) is not about looking the same, sounding the same, and believing all the same. It is about taking up the cross and following Him.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

There is good news here for those who have the nerve to hear it. The gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn. The gospel is not a table knife but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. The gospel is not pablum. It

is powerful stuff powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties, but as frightening as it is, it is not to be feared.

The peace of God is worth anything it takes to get there, and anyone knows that the absence of conflict is not peace. The good news is that in Christ, God has given us someone worth fighting about, and someone with clout enough to end all the fighting, for his word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces (Ibid).

Between God in the desert of Canaan saving his son Ishmael and blessed daughter Hagar AND God's beloved Son, Jesus by the Sea of Galilee redefining family by love and not DNA, we have texts of hope where there only appeared to be death and judgment. Things are not always what they appear to be.

What about you and your life? Can you take what appears to be hardship and pain and turn it into a new opportunity to transcend any oppression and any judgment? Can you take rejection and turn it into resurrection? Can you take what seems to crush and overwhelm you and turn it into hope and new life? Can you take your silent tears and allow God to give you living water?

Remember - no matter what you are facing, your story is not over. Your story is simply turning to a new chapter in the book of your life.

God hears you. Always remember this. God hears you.

Amen.

