

From the Pulpit

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*“Isaac and Ishmael:
A Story for our Time”
Genesis 21:8-21; Romans 6:1b-11;
Matthew 10:24-29*

June 22, 2014

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 2, June 22, 2014, dedicated to our Moderator Frank Cook, Sue and their family in the week of great celebration – a Doctor daughter and a grandchild and always to the glory of God!

“Isaac and Ishmael: A Story for our Time”

Genesis 21:8-21; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-29

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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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There is so much happening in our text from Genesis this morning; it is hard to know where to dig in. It sounds like pulp fiction, not Biblical narrative. There is a love triangle – two women share the bed of the same man. One woman is seemingly barren and gives her “slave girl” to her husband so that she might be a surrogate mother.

When the seemingly barren woman finally gives birth 13 years later, the squabbling gets mean. Everybody gets hurt. The surrogate mother and the oldest son are thrown

out of the house and into the desert because the jealous wife doesn't like the way they look at her and her young son. The wife who forces the expulsion acts like nothing happened – even though she created the whole scene – and the man seems to play dumb.

The Egyptian slave woman and her son are saved by God in the desert – at the exact location God later saves the nation named for the other son when his people are cast out as slaves in Egypt. Are you confused? Love triangles tend to do that. If you feel like a judge in Family Court trying to sort out who is with whom and what child has been birthed by what dad, I can empathize with you.

The story is deep and painful – a woman's infertility, surrogate motherhood, class and race differences, innuendos of abuse – all the price human beings pay for God's will to be done. Have I mentioned that this love triangle sets off fireworks that are still exploding to this day – the split between Judaism and Islam – both claiming papers proving Abraham as their father and each son claiming ascendancy to God through their blood line? Ishmael is Islam's claim to God's inside track while Isaac is Judaism's claim as God's chosen people.

By the end of this section of Genesis we find ourselves wondering where the Good News is in this story. We have to wonder – if being chosen comes at such a great cost, what is God doing here? Said another way, we wonder “what is the Spirit saying to the church?”

In Genesis 16-21 we have a full blown family affair. It gets deeper when we turn to the texts in Genesis 22 – the sacrifice of Isaac. It is no wonder Pastor Dan asked me last week, “Do you really want to preach in Genesis?” Dan, I said, “Yes,” but I am rethinking “No.”

Rabbi Burton Visotzky reflecting on this difficult text with Bill Moyer’s in Bill’s PBS series Genesis: A Living Conversation says,

“This story of this family is so distressing. In the synagogue we read the five books of Moses (the Torah) every year. When we come to this story, I find myself holding onto to my chair trying not to flee. It is so immediate, partly because it is not so much about my ancestors but about the mixed family so many of us experience – first wife, second wife, surrogate parenthood, children conflicts. Everyone alive today knows someone who has gone through something like this. I just find it terribly wrenching.... As a divorced rabbi, I find my own life intrudes

into my listening of the story” (Genesis, Doubleday, NY, NY, 1996, p. 187).

How about you? Do too many elements of this story “intrude into your listening of this story?” Does it sound like and feel like family and friends you know and love? Your own? Others close to you? And we ask – in our families, with our friends - Where is God in the midst of this? This is a real question crying out from the depths of our souls – not a pious predication delivered to make us sound good.

As we come to the end of Genesis 21, we see Hagar watching Ishmael die. She cries but no tears can come when no water is found in your own body. Food gone, water gone, Hagar watches her teenage son bake unto death. Sitting off a distance from him, he is dying under a tree in the desert of Shur, and she gives one last cry to God, “Do not let me look on the death of my child!” In hospital bedrooms, on city streets, in our own church parlor with Good Samaritan, all too many mothers have cried this same cry. Mothers who have seen their children swept away by mental illness, hunger, gun violence and struggles of the soul, have cried to God for help in what has been the desert of their lives – the place of desertion and desperation. “*Do*

not let me look on the death of my child.” It is at the point of utter desperation that God hears her cry and saves her son.

Yesterday, following the wedding of Erin and Adam, I was talking with Erin’s grandparents. They were telling me about their four sons – but all we ended up talking about was their son who died four years ago. The pain of his loss to their lives was palpable. His mother, like Hagar, looked at me with crying eyes as she told me of his death at 51. No mother in any time or place can look upon their child dying before them and face it without absolute pain sinking in and real cries of pain coming out.

Perhaps this Love Triangle turned deeply sour is a gift to us. Perhaps this story of two great nations being born – the nation of Judaism and Islam, or Isaac and Ishmael – is simply this – a story for our times – a reminder of our brokenness and struggle to get family right. Our familial stories have so many twists and turns. Some of them are beautiful and touching and some of them are painfully ugly. Sometimes beauty and ugliness are woven together – inseparable in the eyes of God.

Trying to figure out our Abrahamic family tree, I travelled four years ago to the Caves of Machpelah in

Hebron, on the west bank in the Palestinian territory. Buried beside Abraham are his wife Sarah, their son Isaac, his wife Rebecca, their son Jacob and his wife Leah. Also buried there is Ishmael – Abraham’s firstborn son. But Hagar, Ishmael’s mother is not buried here. She is buried in Mecca. She was not welcomed in the Tombs of the Patriarchs. But, there are other family members missing – Esau is not here, neither is Rachel. While Adam and Eve are said to be buried here – none of their sons or daughters and family are here. The story of this family burial site must be told through the missing bones as well as those accounted for. Is this not true for our families as well? The ones missing from the family plots are the stories unseen, untold, unheard of.

At the tomb of Abraham and some of his descendants, I paid homage to Father Abraham, the matriarchs and patriarchs of three faiths – all of his descendants. I knelt in the synagogue and the mosque to pray for the Muslims and the Jews. I prayed for peace among the children of Isaac and Ishmael - who are buried beside each other.

To reach Hebron, you must travel through checkpoints and much Israeli security. The distance from Jerusalem to Hebron is 17.6 miles – the distance from central Columbus

to Powell – perhaps. But, this trip is sobering. You travel past the West Bank Wall, through checkpoints, past barbed-wire towers and machine-gun nests, through territory which is clearly occupied by great numbers of Israeli military. Finally, you arrive in Hebron. Through heavy security, you make your way into the mosque. By a large green steel door, our tour guide stopped to say, “This door leads to the underground tombs. It is nearly impossible to gain entrance into the caves of Machpelah.” Through a hole in the floor of the mosque, you look down into the cave.

The Mosque is really old and very simple. The huge oak lectern, where imams deliver the Friday sermons is 800 years old and carved out of one single piece of wood. Amazing. And yet, the synagogue is even older. Truly fascinating! The walls were built by King Herod - 2,000 years ago and are believed to be the longest single cut stone ever discovered to form walls.

What I find most fascinating about my visit to the family tomb of Abraham is that Isaac, carrier of Abraham’s line in Judaism is buried in the Mosque, while Ishmael, carrier of Abraham’s line in Islam is buried in the Synagogue. Each day, as faithful followers of Abraham go to pray in Mosque and Synagogue, they encounter “the tomb

of the other son.” I have not seen much written about this phenomenon. I see it as a sign from God for our times. I see it as sign from God to work out the differences. We are called by God to embrace the “other son of Abraham.” Perhaps then and only then, will peace come to the whole family of faith.

How about if we apply this to our own families and the families of our friends? What if you and I took this to heart? What if we looked at our families and the families which weave into our stories (neighbors, school mates, work mates, students, others) and found away to cross over – to pray for them as though they were our family too? What if we prayed for mercy for those who acted cruelly to us or hurt us in our family and beyond? What if we found a way to forgive the wounds inflicted on us within and outside of our family? What if we found a way to bury our hurts, fears, discord and divisions? What if we prayed at the tomb of “the other” as if he were our own flesh and blood?

Two great nations were formed in Ishmael and Isaac. Perhaps it time for two great nations to find one great peace.

As I knelt in prayer in the Mosque of Abraham under which Isaac was buried and the synagogue of Abraham

under which Ishmael was buried, I prayed that God would hear the cries of mothers now - in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, in Columbus, Ohio – “O God, let your human family find a way to peace so that our sons and daughters might know no more discord and pain.” Amen.

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