

June 25, 2017

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Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew

## Family Values

Abraham and Sarah, these great Old Testament figures, recipients of the promise that God would make of them a great nation, Abraham and Sarah, our father and mother, our ancestors in faith, have some complicated elements to their characters. There are some gnarled and twisted and broken branches in this family tree. There are some aspects of the family saga recorded in Genesis that cause one to pause, to question, to feel confusion, even revulsion.

Today's story from Genesis, for example. It begins with a family party, a party for Isaac, who is Abraham and Sarah's son, the son God promised to them both, a promise that filled Sarah with laughter. But Isaac isn't the only one at the party, Isaac isn't the only son. Abraham has another son, Ishmael. Ishmael came about because Abraham thought he should hurry things along, reproductively. Abraham was getting really old, so he got together with Hagar, who was his slave. This picture, this power differential, all is already more than disturbing, but in addition there is the fact that Abraham decided to make a child with his slave because he thought God might not make good on the promise. But God did, God did not need Abraham's extra marital acts, and now Abraham has two sons, by two different women. There are hints that Abraham loves both sons, but Sarah does not. Sarah does not like seeing Ishmael playing at her son Isaac's party; Sarah does not like hearing Ishmael laugh, so Sarah tells Abraham to send Ishmael and his mother Hagar away, into the wilderness, get rid of them, let them die. The matter is "very distressing" to Abraham, but he does so, God help him.

These are our father and mother in faith. This is the backstory to the children's song, "Father Abraham, had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham..." This story is but one reason I'm always a little taken aback when the Bible is held up as a simple template for wholesome family living. When I hear that I think, "Have you read the Bible?" When you do, as you continue on in it, in Abraham's story, and the stories of his sons, it doesn't get less complicated. Ishmael and his mother Hagar, thank God, thanks to God, survive, and Ishmael himself becomes a father of a great nation. Because God says he will, and he does, and Ishmael's descendants appear in several places thereafter in Genesis, including in another story about a favored son, the story of Joseph. As Joseph's brothers conspire to rid themselves of him, an unwanted family member, as Joseph's brothers think about killing him, Joseph is saved by the appearance of some passersby, Ishmaelites. The descendants of Ishmael come upon Joseph, the descendant of Isaac, when he is in a distressing situation, and then they buy him, and sell him into slavery.

Now, some look at such stories and say, well, that's just the Old Testament, it's full of disturbing stuff, Jesus makes it all better. But the New Testament is equally complicated. Jesus has some hard things to say about family, including in today's gospel: "I've come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother" and "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." These are disturbing sayings, and I've heard them used in disturbing ways. My best friend from high school was the daughter of a pastor, a stern man who gave his work vastly more time than his children, and as he did so, she said, he would sometimes quote this verse to her, he would say to his children, in defense of his work as a pastor, "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

That is a twisted use of the Bible. What Jesus says is hard, but not hurtful. That is not who Jesus is. Jesus is on the side of vulnerable, Jesus hears their cries, as God heard the cries of Hagar and her son. Jesus loves all children, and Jesus wants all to have good parents.

I think Jesus' hard saying, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" is intended to catch our attention, to make us pause, to make us question: what does this mean? It's intended to prompt us to read closely, read rigorously, read the whole story of God's word for us. When we do, I think we hear God saying this: There is something yet more worthy of love than your family.

These are surprising words: There is something yet more worthy of love than your family. They were surprising words to people in the time to which Jesus first spoke them, a culture based on clan and heredity—think of Abraham and Sarah. These are surprising words to us, too. We may not send half-siblings out into the wilderness to die—though we may do that, too. How many of our brothers, how many of our sisters, have we banished to wastelands? Left to die? Left with injustice? And there are certainly ways in which we favor others, singularly focus on offspring, even, I think, to fetishize childhood, as if reproduction is the pinnacle of existence. Think, for example, of how much reinforcement there is in our culture for viewing one's progeny as one's life project. People often speak of their devotion to their children with even a sort of boastfulness. Don't hear me wrong, the love from which this springs is holy, God-given, but it can be twisted, too. There can also be ways in which such attention means what a child does, who a child is, is all a reflection, and ultimately an achievement, of the parent. Don't we all recognize that behavior as unhealthy, both on the part of the parent, and, even more tragically, for the well-being of the child?

When Jesus says that there is something yet more worthy of love than your family, he is not advising mistreatment of the least of these. Rather, Jesus boldly announces a vision of life that is bigger than one's own gene pool, or legal certificate, or nuclear unit. Love your family, yes, but know its limitations. Do we not all know that, as well? Don't we all know about the limitations of our families? Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. Don't we recognize the jealousy over another's joy, the complicated couplings, the tensions between siblings and parents and children that runs throughout the Old Testament? Biblical sagas are less a blueprint for a happy family than a reflection of reality. Are we not still living out the story of Abraham's sons? "I am one of them, and so are you..." And so is Ishmael, to whom Muslim tradition traces its line. Our Muslim brothers and sisters are people of Abrahamic faith. God heard their great, great, great grandmother, Hagar, when she wept in the wilderness, and God came to her aid.

Leo Tolstoy famously begins the novel *Anna Karenina*, a novel that is a character study of adultery and suicide, with the line, "Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Humans have found myriad ways to be unhappy, even and maybe especially with those closest to us. Jesus speaks about division, not to recommend it, but to name it, and to name a way beyond it. Jesus does not want us to love our families any less. What Jesus says is, "Love God more." Love God more than you do, Jesus says, and find how you can love your family more. Love God more, and find you can love your children more, and your parents more, and your in-laws more, and your neighbors more, and strangers more, people of others faiths more, the whole human family. Love God more; lose your life to that, and find it.