

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 21:8-21
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 10: 24-39
June 21, 2020

“Do Not Think I Came to Bring Peace”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Neither Abraham nor Sarah come out looking particularly good in our reading this morning. It had been Sarah's idea to give her servant Hagar to Abraham to impregnate in the first place because Sarah had been unable to have a child. She used Hagar as a surrogate. No one asked Hagar what she wanted. And then years later when Sarah finally did give birth to a son, she suddenly wanted rid of them both, Hagar and her son Ishmael. Ishmael was 13-years-old when he was rejected. Up till then he had been the apple of his father's eye. Overnight, he was nothing. Sarah's vindictiveness is appalling. Abraham's cowardice in caving in to it is damning. The slave woman and her child were treated with the injustice with which slaves have always been treated. But God intervened. God took Hagar and her son under God's wing and provided for them. Ishmael became the father of a great nation, traditionally, the Arab nation. Within Islam it is Ishmael, not Isaac, who is God's chosen one, and it is Abraham who takes them to Mecca.

Given the history of these two peoples, how much enmity could have been avoided if a slave had been treated justly as the human being that she was?

Jesus entered a world full of conflict, much like our own. There are some people who actually like conflict. I think they're called politicians. I am not one of them. Yet Jesus prepares us for a world in which we will experience a lot of conflict. If they accused him of being Beelzebul how much more will they say about us!? We should expect it. We should expect it because we are God's slaves. The word used is slave. We are like Hagar, totally at the mercy of our master. But our master is not arbitrary and capricious like Abraham and Sarah were. Our master is God, the one who has counted every hair on our heads. But because we belong to our God, we directly represent God, and we are called to give voice to God's opposition to human greed, injustice, lies, cruelty and selfish ambition.

Some have narrowly defined religious persecution to things directly related to evangelism. It is preaching the word and that's it. But Corrie Ten Boom was not sent to a concentration camp for preaching. She was sent to a concentration camp for hiding Jews and helping them escape to freedom. Persecution happens when we resist or expose evil. It happens when we demand change or undermine the present power structure. It happens not just when we speak the word, but when we LIVE the word.

In this context Jesus tells us to not be afraid, “for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known.”

Acts of evil are often done covertly and even huge crimes are covered up. I grew up believing that my nation was always the good guy. My textbooks were written in the fifties and sixties. I did not know that they were a form of propaganda. I did not know that they glossed over or completely omitted anything that contradicted the narrative of righteous America. It didn't occur to me to question as a child why there were no women or people of color in the story. Propaganda was what the Russians did! We were the upright Americans fighting for justice for all. But my school textbooks said nothing about the Native American genocide that happened with the forced removal of thousands of men, women and children during the Trail of Tears. It didn't tell me that they were deliberately given cholera infected blankets. My school text books said nothing about Jim Crow. There was not a single sentence about lynching. I did not know that there had been a "Black Wall Street", the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, that was burned to the ground by white supremacists and that at least 300 people were murdered and buried in mass graves. The memory of that event was so successfully hidden that only recently did residents of that town learn of it! The Republican mayor is now working to set the record straight. I add his political party because racial justice should not be a partisan issue, and it is often in danger of becoming one. Racial bias must be confronted by all of us. The white leaders in 1921 in Tulsa deliberately hid what they had done. Now it is being exposed.

My textbooks also didn't tell me that Hitler was inspired by the eugenics movement in the United States that began in 1907 but gained traction in the 1920s and 1930s. I didn't know that over 64,000 people were sterilized against their will so that their "undesirable traits" like homosexuality, disability, promiscuity (limited to women of course) or just plain poverty would not be passed on. I had no idea that in 1927 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the state of Virginia seeking to sterilize Carrie Buck for promiscuity because she gave birth out of wedlock.

No one also told me that in June of 1939, the German ocean liner *St. Louis* and its 937 passengers, almost all Jews fleeing Hitler's regime, was turned away from the port of Miami and forced to return to Europe where more than a quarter of them died in the Holocaust.

As surprising as it might be to those educated in more recent times, I also did not even learn that Japanese men, women and children were deprived of their freedom and put in internment camps during World War II. And I didn't know that while I was in high school in 1975 in *Smith v. State*, the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals unanimously upheld the right of the state to prosecute a 16-year-old sodomy defendant as an adult and to give him a sentence of ten years in prison.

These things are now known, but atrocities have not stopped. As Americans we have ideals but we often don't live up to them. The **one advantage we have** is that our founders were profoundly suspicious of human nature and created a system with checks and balances worked into it, a system which we are watching be eroded today. We cannot allow that to happen. Americans are not worse than any other nation, but we are also not better than any other nation. People are sinners! Human nature has not changed. People

will literally try to get away with murder. God knows that, and as Christians we are called to focus a spotlight on what is wrong and demand that justice be done. We are to identify with the downtrodden and defenseless. And we are to proclaim truth from the roof tops. Will this make us popular? *Absolutely not.* But Jesus says to not be afraid, because the worst they can do is kill us. That's not exactly comforting, but it should give us the perspective of just how important it is for us to live and speak our faith in the world, even knowing how much trouble it can stir up.

And what about today? What about a nation that locks up refugees in camps and puts children in cages? Christians have spoken out—but it is still going on. What about a world in which many gay youth are still being rejected by their parents and thrown out on the street? What about a society so infused with racism that we have ignored the violent deaths of people of color at the hands of the police?

Standing up for what is right is an essential part of our witness. Jesus said, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." He was referring to more than the words we speak. He was referring to the life we live. We can go to church every Sunday. We can tell people we're Christians. But if we act selfishly, if we stand by and do nothing while others are being hurt, if we refuse to help those in need, we have denied Christ. And he brings it all home with deliberately provocative language. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." We know that Jesus wasn't advocating violence. He was speaking metaphorically, but he wanted his followers to know that the people who opposed them could even be members of their own family. Conflict will sometimes be inevitable if we live a life that is faithful to God, and it can come from where we least expect it.

But there is a promise at the end of these words challenging us to stand up and be counted. Jesus said, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." This can, of course, mean our physical existence. We can die as a result of doing what God wants us to do. But at a less extreme level it can also be how we choose to live our life. Those who live only for their own personal prosperity and advantage will end up losing because they will never really experience life. They will only skim along on the surface, never truly knowing God and therefore never truly knowing joy. But those who set aside personal advantage to work on behalf of those who are in need, **will live**. The selfish people are not the happy ones. The servant people are. Amen.

Genesis 21:8-21

8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. 9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that

slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob.

17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Matthew 10: 24-39

24 "The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. 25 It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

26 "So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. 28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. 30 And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

32 "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. 33 But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

34 "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn

"a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

36 a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'

37 "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of

me. **38** Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. **39** Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.