

“Times That Bring Division”

**“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”
Matthew 10:34.**

I. God’s Uses Broken Vessels-Genesis 21:8-21

Let me begin this morning by giving you a chronology of the saga of Abraham, the patriarch. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nation. In the process, we learned that the Abraham story is one of a rather dysfunctional family. Abraham married his half sister. Their faith in God was weak at first. Both Sarah and Abraham laughed when God told them that they would be parents in their old age. At 77, Sarah had not conceive and doubted that God could fulfill his promise of giving Abraham a lineage through her. Therefore, she tries to fulfill God’s promise by giving Abraham her servant Hagar as a surrogate mother. An so, Ishmael was born and treated at first as Sarah’s own son. The Abraham saga then continued with the covenant circumcision of Abraham, Ishmael and all the males in the household. Then came last week’s story that God was going to do what seemed humanly impossible, make Abraham and Sarah parents in their old age.

The story was then sidetracked as Abraham negotiated with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah. We are horrified by the attempted rape of Lot’s guests at Sodom. That was followed by the flight of Lot and his daughters from Sodom and the seduction and incest of Lot in the hill country near Zoar. We are mortified by Abraham’s cowardice in passing off Sarah as his sister before Abimelech the king of Gerar.

Nothing Abraham and Sarah did merited their being blessed by God except the faith of Abraham which put him into a right relationship with God. And so, God kept his promise. Sarah conceives at the age of 89 and gave birth to Isaac who was born when Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100. Certainly, Abraham and Sarah would never meet the test of our moral codes based on their personal and family morality and the biblical writer leaves us scratching our heads in wonderment. Yet Abraham believed God, the divisions in the family were overlooked and his faith made him a paradigms of faith for all ages.

Today’s episode occurs two or three years later after the child Isaac was weaned. (Please note that the story teller has lost track of the age of Ishmael, He should be a teen by now.) Now Sarah is having second thought about her surrogate son Ishmael. Upon seeing him playing with her son Isaac, she is jealous and wanted Abraham to get rid of the child and his mother. Was that the right thing to do? Where was Abraham in all of this? Certainly Abraham did not totally agree with that decision and God didn’t either.

Abraham sent them off into the wilderness to die but God had a different plan. Instead of death, God blessed Ishmael to grow up, become an expert bowman, settle in the wilderness of Paran, marry a maiden from his native Egypt and to become the father of twelve tribes. With the story of Abraham, Sarah and their family, we learned how families are often divide, even today. Nevertheless, Abraham was said to be acceptable as a vessel

of God's grace with all of his flaws. God's chosen vessels are seldom perfect by our standards, nevertheless, God can use even a broken vessel.

II. I have not come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. Matthew 10:24-39

In the Gospel for today, Jesus talked about a different kind of division in families.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.” Matthew 10:34-36. All of us know that there are tensions between family members. Many parents are estranged from their children. In-laws often can't stand one another. Many family reunions and gatherings are times of tension. Many of the conflicts in families are caused by a difference of life styles, clashing personalities or power struggles. But what is Jesus talking about here? I believe that Jesus is not talking about the natural conflict that exist between family members. The divisions that he is talking about are as a result of the radical Christian ethics and Christian behavior that crosses the natural boundaries of life and call for a worldwide system of morality, justice and fellowship.

Jesus continues, *“A lover of mother and father more than him is not worthy of Christ. A lover of son or daughter more than him is not worthy of him. And those who seek to save their lives will lose them.”* Matthew 10:37. Is Jesus saying that we should neglect parents or children? Not at all! Jesus is saying that even our closest natural relationships of parents and children should not get in the way of our standing up for and witnessing to the truth—even in the face of a threat of a loss of position or life. When one compromises ones principles, the society we live in often deteriorates and wrong and evil take over. So in our attempts to keep the peace evil thrives. Acquiescence only fuels the fires of the discord and allows evil to reign.

III. When Value and Moral systems Collide

With radical faith, the story of Abraham and Sarah gives us the comfort of knowing that God can and does use broken and divided families. But in the Gospel, Jesus' call to radical division is not just a negative call of family separation. It is a call to union with God, solidarity with all who worship God, to a belief in the truth, to a purity of life and to fellowship with others across national, religious, and other divides. For you see, it is when we witness wrongs and do not seek to right them; turn our heads when others are being abused; watch injustices and do not address them and commit sins and seek not to be forgiven for them that God is dishonored, Christ is crucified anew, discord spreads and our society of which the church is a part goes awry.

I think that it means further that we who are baptized into Christ are called to a new reality, a new way of life. Like Christ who emptied himself of the power of the Godhead and became incarnated into human flesh, we must empty ourselves of the pride, arrogance,

disobedience and any affiliation that is in conflict with our faith. That is what I think that Jesus meant when he said that his sister, brother or mother is anyone who does the will of his father.

This sword of division is further explained in another way: where communal values and morality conflict with ones selfish values and morality; where righteousness or justice is in conflict with ones personal piety; or where the moral is in conflict with what is construed to be legal. These are times for us to divide ourselves from that which is not of Christ. During the II World War when Hitler was trying to exterminate all Jews, if you had been the landlord in the house where Anne Franks was hold up, would you have broke the inhumane German law and concealing and protecting Miss Franks or would you have turned her in? That is the kind of decision that Christ must have had in mind when he said that he came not to bring peace, but a sword.

So, there are divisions and dysfunctional relationships within families that God will overlook and forgive. And there are divisions between family and friends that Christ came to bring about. The question is where will you stand in times of these conflicts? Jesus admonishes each of us to take up his or her cross and follow him.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Matthew 10:34, 38-39.

Let us Pray:

Lord, give each of us the faith to trust in your promises, the courage to stand up for what is right and the love and clarity to make a difference. Amen.