

Gen.: for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.n.
Ps.: be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long.
Rom: Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?
Matt: Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

When Family Fails

On the Sunday after Father's Day, with public School and Sunday school on recess, with many of our families away on vacation...

We read the story of Abraham casting Hagar and his son Ishmael, into the desert with a bit of water and a crust of bread...

Family.

The families of our first ancestors, those whom God chooses, with whom God makes covenants feature murder, as with Cane and Able, betrayal as with Isaac and Esau, treachery as with Joseph and the brothers who sell him into slavery.

And then of course there is king David, whose adultery with Bathsheba leads him to murder her husband, and then whose son Absalom rebels against him and dies when his lovely hair gets caught in a tree as he is fleeing on mule.

What is that you say, "but that is the Old Testament?"

Hah..as if..

Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

This he says to the same disciples he has called away from their families.

Follow me and I will make you fishers of men, and the they follow him, abandoning wives and children, shirking obligations to take care of aging parents.

Not returning home to bury their dead loved ones... walking away from family businesses and their responsibility to provide for their own families....

Jesus himself is no family man but seems rather to uphold something like an alternative family with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Later, the Apostle Paul comes on the scene with no family connections whatsoever, and proceeds to declare social structures, gender roles, family hierarchies to be antithetical to grace.

Given the fraught family relationships in our scriptures, what Jesus says about families it is a wonder that we Christians have so identified ourselves with family, focus on the family, with so-called traditional family values.

But then, in quiet moments, when we talk privately with people we trust about our families, the stories we tell of our family struggles are biblical in their complexities...

Yes, surely and truly, we have much to celebrate and honor in our families, but there is a lot of heartache too, and betrayals, and anger and grudges....

The struggle to love and support one another in our families is at the very core of faith, to fully engage in that struggle and work out the details of forgiveness and healing, of truth-telling and patience is what we all pray for, we all aim for, long for

To raise up a family in faith means **aiming for the ideal of family we pray for** and accepting **the reality of family we live with**, =living in the gap between our prayerful longings and the real living of our lives is the very essence of faithful living...

On earth as it is in heaven...this is our prayer...

If we were to be honest, and if we were to trust enough to tell our own stories.....

Some of us know what it is like to be Ishmael, to be seen as a threat and a danger thus cast out for no reason at all save for the fear and narrow vision of people we want to love us, who should love us, who should see us as a gift and a joy rather than a threat...

Some of us know what it like to be Hagar, with no power and with no say, our well-being dependent on the whim of others, our suffering easily dismissed with fine sentiments--God will take care of you.

And then, too, some of us know what it is like to be Sarah, to see trouble coming long before anyone else does and raising the alarm, demanding action, seeking to limit damage we see coming, to secure the future of the family no matter the cost to others.

Those who have been hurt or injured, like Ishmael and Hagar, surely understand what Jesus says about family, because there are times in family life when family fails us, fails to take care of us, to love and accept us; there are times when it necessary to tell the truth and call family members to account, and these are those times Jesus speaks of... times when division is faithful, as Jesus says, times when peace is not about pretending everything's okay or about keeping quiet.

We all have capacity to grow and change and adjust, to share our stories with honesty and humility...

To be willing to lose life in order to gain life...

To distrust and question our Sarah-like fear and certainty of the future as if we can see as God sees...

To ask for forgiveness and to give it, and harder still, to accept forgiveness ourselves...

To foster family relationships that extend beyond those we have known or imagined to be.

It happens all the time, and these are stories we need to tell, love we have experienced, love we see growing all around us....

Ask a grandparent about loving an adopted grandchild, some neighbor child whose grandparents live across the country or who are no longer living, about birthday cards sent and cookies baked and watching them grow with delight and wonder.

Or look at the many children who have been so well loved by two families when their one family suffers divorce, about the ways they work together apart for the good of their new families, about how they work out ways to honor their vows in ways that transcend what can be imagined, save by faith.

Talk to a someone who has lost a spouse and found love again, a miracle, a life lost, a life gained; see families thriving after they have helped one of their family members recover from addictions.

Listen to the stories of reconciliation, late in life, between family members who have lived their lives angry at one another, about time and time and time lost, but the joy of life gained...

Look at the strength and power of families to extend belonging and dignity to those whose own families failed them, who have taken them in and made them part of their own families, their own lives.

Talk to those who live alone but have families of friends to celebrate their lives with, the pride and joy they find together, a family of friendship, of shared companionship.

The challenging and difficult stories we find in our scriptures are a gift to us, because they allow us to see our own humanness in them and again to find God's faithfulness to us even when our own families fail us, even and especially when we fail them.

God is big enough to rescue Hagar and Ishmael and to bless Abraham, Isaac and Sarah, too.

The brothers Jacob and Esau reconcile, and so we learn about forgiveness.

Joseph rises to power and repays his brothers' treachery with kindness, and so we learn about generosity.

King David's sense of guilt and depth of grief inspires him to write psalms, and so we learn how to pray.

The Apostles Paul expands the boundaries of family and tribe that divide us one from another and thus we are called to expand our notion of what family means in the light of God's love.

And Jesus teaches us to pray, Our Father, for we are brothers and sisters in Christ, the family of God, which nothing can divide, we are bound together by faith, in peace, in the name Christ, and God will never fail us.

Jesus sees our struggles and heartaches and love and understand the our deep, primal, human need of family to accept us and nurture us and care for us, to see the best in us even when we don't meet their expectations of us, even when we don't measure up to their hopes for us, and especially when they reject us and abandon us.

Jesus speaks for us, for the truth of who we are just as we are.

He wants us to see and to believe what is true and what we see when God rescues Hagar and Ishmael in the desert,

While our family may at times fail us, God never will. Amen.

Matthew 10:24-39

[Jesus said] 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master.

If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.

What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

'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.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and 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.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.