

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Martha Sterne

Gospel Reading: Matthew 10:24-39

25 June, 2017



Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

As I have mentioned before, all branches of my mother's family – Presbyterians but one side markedly more so – have lived in Natchez, Mississippi for a couple of hundred years and Natchez being a small town, they marry one another – I have more double cousins than I can shake a stick at, not that I would want to shake a stick at them – usually. And their hobby through the years has been drinking brown liquor any old time of day – that's not true; not breakfast - and telling stories about each other. For Natchez people are deeply and everlastingly interested in themselves. They remind me of us! And the stories shape-shift of course depending on the interests and alliances of the teller. Carroll has said for years, nobody tells the truth in your family! I think that is a little harsh.

My aunt, the novelist Ellen Douglas, used to say that one of her grandmothers had the capacity to disbelieve anything bad that any of her family was accused of because how could a member of her family do such a nefarious deed?! On the other hand, she said her other grandmother would hear about something bad a member of her family had done and she would just reclassify the nefarious deed to a necessary, probably a fine deed that needed doing! Because how could a deed be nefarious since a member of her family did it? So you can see how the assessments of deeds and the doers of deeds are shall we say fluid in my Natchez family except somehow or another in the end – it's all just fine. It all works out just grand.

We didn't think up this slanty way of seeing things. Scripture is full of slanted stories. This morning we have the Hebrew scripture telling the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael being expelled into the desert because their presence disturbs Sarah who says to Abraham – hey this son of that slave woman (the same one she offered to Abraham in the first place) will not inherit with my son – so cast them out. And then just like in my Mississippi family the daddy does just what the mama says to do. I didn't get that gene.

The Abraham stories which the lectionary gives us all summer long this year are some of the best narrative writing in scripture and they sure don't airbrush the characters. So Sarah is shown in all her complicated mama grizzly beariness. What matters to Sarah is her kid. Not the other's kid. We know about that—if we allow ourselves to be as honest as these stories. So this expulsion/deportation of the other's child is sandwiched between the more important news of the very old Sarah's baby Isaac being promised last week and the nightmare tale of Sarah's Isaac coming this close to being sacrificed by Abraham next week. For Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Isaac's two boys Esau and especially Jacob and then Jacob's twelve kids who turn into the twelve tribes of Israel and on and on – that's the main arc of Genesis and of course it is, for the children of those tribes are telling these stories.

But if you look over to the other children, Ishmael and the children of Ishmael from whom thousands of years later emerges the Prophet Mohammed, they don't see themselves as an interruption or a sideline to the main story. In Islamic versions, Ishmael is Abraham's beloved first born son and Abraham always loves him. And actually Hagar's desperate search for water in the desert is not just an odd plot device. Her search for water becomes the hajj - the journey that to this day all Muslims yearn to take to the wellspring of their faith. And Mecca is founded by Hagar, Ishmael and Abraham and there the father and the son build the sacred Kaaba toward which all Islam faces for

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prayer. And so what is referred to in Hebrew texts as Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion – in Islamic texts that is called the beginning. For in Islam, Abraham is not some ethnic otherness. Abraham – the father of all three Abrahamic faiths – is simply the first friend of God. And we and all them others – we are all children of the first friend of God. Isn't that something?

Now I don't think we ever stop seeing and telling our up-closest stories as the real story, the important story. We certainly haven't stopped doing that in my family over in Natchez. Just this spring, a close cousin told me that one of our fifth or sixth cousins – so those other people - said to her, I still don't get how y'all ended up Roseland, which is yes OUR beautiful old farm. But we ended up with it in the 1840's! Let it go!! For Pete's sakes, give it up! I don't even want to get into the cemetery plot fights. Well, okay one, my great great Aunt Marion dug up Uncle Jamie because she said he felt like he wasn't wanted.

I don't think I will every stop seeing things first out of my eyes and I don't think I will ever stop thinking about the people I love first and I don't think you will either. That's not fake news; that is the human condition. But what is fake, what is false, what is sinful is to ignore or deny kinship with other human beings. No human being on this earth is a child of a lesser god and the great and cheerful good news of All Saints' – note the name, all saints – is that we know that. We forget it but we know it. Because – two things we remember here around this block.

First over and over and over we remember what he said - Don't be so scared. Don't be afraid. Fear not. That's the same message by the way that God gave Hagar when she was terrified her boy was going to die and the same message Jesus proclaims this morning and in the gospel over and over again and also these are the signature words of your rector three times ago, Frank Ross. Don't be afraid. For fear is surely what drives so much - that there won't be enough, there won't be enough which leads in a slanty way to toxic disdain for the other. And also when we are afraid, we lose. On so many levels. We just do.

And the second thing we do around here on our better days – is as Jesus says - let it go – let loose. The words we say and sing in the dark womb of this beloved church – we let them loose. Remember last Sunday - when the lights went out and we really were left in the dark, the life of Jesus was throbbing in these windows all around us. My best All Saints moment ever. Everything messed up in just the best way and we didn't cower or divide up into little family groups or worry about me and mine against the other. We lit candles and cell phones and helped each other feel our way to the altar and broke bread together on our knees and there was abundance. We sang amazing grace and meant every word. And as we walked out of the dark into the light, we promised each other that we would publish glad tidings, tidings of peace. Tidings of Jesus—redemption and release. That's who we are Saints. All around this block, we are the people of glad tidings and tidings of peace, redemption, and release. That's our story for all we love and all the others God calls us to love. That's our story – always incomplete and imperfect and always will be and you have a holy new chapter coming! That's our glad story- and we are sticking to it. And thank you for this year, for the best chapter of my priesthood. And God willing it will all turn out just fine. It will all turn out just grand.

Amen.

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