

## OBEDIENCE vs. LINEAGE

6/21/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 7 (Year A): Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Matthew 10:24-39

Have any of you started a new hobby during our Stay Home; Stay Safe time? To try and find some work/life balance, I enrolled in a self-paced, online novel-writing class. It's been great fun! I mention it, because what I've learned is that a good story has to have lots of conflict. To grab the reader's attention, the heroine has to get into trouble, resolve the trouble, and then get into more trouble.

I've been developing this exaggerated relationship—full of resentments and misunderstandings—between my protagonist and her mother. It'll be much more interesting to read, but since it'll clearly be biographical to those who know me, I worry whether others will understand that's not really how I feel about my mom. I have this heightened awareness now that all reading requires an understanding of the context and genre of the writing.

In today's readings from Genesis and Matthew, for example, we hear stories that seem counter-intuitive to God's message of love and compassion; that is until we remember the genre of writing and the context in which it was written. So, there's definitely a lot of "trouble" to keep the reader's interest piqued in both stories.

There's also a question of family relationships and loyalty in each reading. In Genesis, Sarah has finally given birth to her own son, Isaac, but that miracle doesn't seem to be enough for her. She also wants to ensure that it is her son who is given the birthright to the family's inheritance.

Abraham, as would have been customary in those days, has had children with others, including a concubine named Hagar. At Sarah's insistence, Hagar and her child are sent away. Talk about trouble! Out in the desert, Hagar runs out of food, and she decides to walk away from her son so that she doesn't have to watch him die.

In Matthew, the conflict is heightened as Jesus says things like: "I didn't come to bring peace to the earth, rather I bring a sword." He could've said, "I've come to help you sever the ties that no longer serve you as a disciple," but the author of Matthew, has a habit of using extremes to get the listener's attention.

Matthew seems to want people to really understand the commitment one is making when deciding to embark on the path of discipleship. This is not a path of comfort for those of us already living comfortable lives. Rather Jesus calls us to be a part of an on-going revolution—a revolution that turns human tendencies on their head—taking, instead, actions that are life-giving for the greatest number of people vs. personal preferences.

So, Jesus moves the idea of a loyalty to a level beyond biology. He sets this up by saying, "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother," and so on. It's not that Jesus is against biological families, it's that the level of loyalty he's promoting requires us to strive for the well-being of people beyond our immediate family.

In both Genesis and Matthew, the conflict—the extremes—are set-up to demonstrate the universality of God's love and promise. Yes, Hagar and her son are sent away, but God meets them out in the wilderness to provide justice through her son. It's not their lineage that matters; what matters is their obedience to God.

Have you noticed that this use of language to get our attention is much easier to absorb when it's in a poem or song? For instance, our offertory hymn refers to the image of a sparrow found in today's Gospel, indicating that if God has a caring eye on something as insignificant as

a sparrow, then God—who created us in God’s image—will surely be watching over us. In a hymn, we understand that the message isn’t that sparrows are insignificant, but we now have a vivid image to carry with us. In contrast, when words are read in narrative form, we start asking all the usual questions: Did Jesus mean this literally? Did he really hate sparrows?

Once we let go of the irrelevant questions, we can settle into a deeper consideration of the greater message in today’s readings: that our lineage doesn’t matter, it’s our obedience to God that matters. In other words, we don’t have to trace back our lineage to prove that we are one of God’s children. We are all God’s beloved.

Which takes us to where we are right now. I don’t stay at home because I’m scared of getting COVID; I stay home because I don’t want to accidentally expose myself to an asymptomatic person at a restaurant and then infect everyone else with whom I come into contact. My loyalty isn’t to my preferred way of living—of going out regularly to movies and flying up to Seattle to see friends; my loyalty is to humanity as a whole—to all of God’s family.

Likewise, my loyalty isn’t to maintaining the status quo for my own family and the systems I was born into; my loyalty is trying to live into the baptismal vow of “striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.”

And in our obedience to God, we find obedience is not a restrictive way of being, rather within it, we are freed to experience life more fully. As Jesus says, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

-AMEN

## Collect of the Day

O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your lovingkindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy;

and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

**Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17**

- 1 Bow down your ear, O LORD, and answer me, \*  
for I am poor and in misery.
- 2 Keep watch over my life, for I am faithful; \*  
save your servant who puts his trust in you.
- 3 Be merciful to me, O LORD, for you are my God; \*  
I call upon you all the day long.
- 4 Gladden the soul of your servant, \*  
for to you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
- 5 For you, O LORD, are good and forgiving, \*  
and great is your love toward all who call upon you.
- 6 Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer, \*  
and attend to the voice of my supplications.
- 7 In the time of my trouble I will call upon you, \*  
for you will answer me.
- 8 Among the gods there is none like you, O LORD, \*  
nor anything like your works.
- 9 All nations you have made will come and worship you, O LORD, \*  
and glorify your Name.
- 10 For you are great;  
you do wondrous things; \*  
and you alone are God.
- 16 Turn to me and have mercy upon me; \*  
give your strength to your servant;  
and save the child of your handmaid.
- 17 Show me a sign of your favor,  
so that those who hate me may see it and be ashamed; \*  
because you, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

**Matthew 10:24-39**

Jesus said to the twelve disciples, “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 apart from 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.”