

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 7, Year A
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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." (Matthew 10:24-39)

One of the joys, and challenges, of parenting college aged students is their return home every summer, and all the new knowledge they bring with them – along with loads of laundry, crates of books, and those plastic cups decorated with frat party slogans!

Not long after his arrival home from William & Mary, my son Turner began to share some of his newfound wisdom from a behavioral psychology class he just finished. "95% of all families are dysfunctional," he announced to me. "Including ours" – then, he proceeded to tell me exactly why this is so!

We hear about family values in every election campaign, we debate what causes families to fall apart, people even blame all the problems on the fact that no one is in church anymore, and if we would all just study the Bible, we would know how family life is supposed to be. And yet if you look at our readings for today – all you get from these biblical families is dysfunction!

In today's passage from Genesis, for instance, we hear the heartbreaking story of how Abraham, the Great Father of Israel, appeases his jealous wife Sarah by casting her proud slave Hagar, along with his first child Ishmael, out into the wilderness. What we don't hear is how Sarah had convinced Abraham to have this child with Hagar in the first place, fearing she'd have no offspring of her own. And yet, once Sarah bears her own son Isaac, all bets are off, and Sarah decides to erase Hagar and her beloved child from the scene, entirely. Out of Sight, out of mind. And if that's not bad enough, just read a bit further in Genesis and you'll discover how Abraham's grandson Jacob steals his brother's birthright, and how Jacob's sons throw their brother Joseph into a ditch. Seriously, if you want a good beach read, take the Bible with you and read the entire book of Genesis.

And then, in today's gospel reading, Jesus doesn't make matters any better by fanning the flames of such family feuds. "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth;" Jesus says, "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." Oh, really?

We do not like these words; they make us uncomfortable, just as they did the faithful, religious people centuries ago who were offended by so much of what Jesus said and did. So we tend to distance ourselves from what we hear, telling ourselves: that was then, and this is now. But the truth is, we have a lot more in common with the people in the bible than we care to admit.

When I first moved to the south, I noticed how many people who grew up here still referred to the War Between the States as that "recent unpleasantness". What struck me about this – and it's something that became especially clear in the observations of my college-aged 'psychology expert' - is that we do the very same thing in our personal lives – we don't like to mention any "recent unpleasantness." We like to keep the peace, even if it is dysfunctional peace.

Jesus knew about this tendency of ours, and he also knew that his message would be divisive, like a sword, and swords can create unpleasantness! The good news that Jesus came to bring didn't sound like good news to everyone; it would shake up values, rearrange priorities, reorient goals. In other words, the gospel would not be a salve, but a sword that would pare away all that wasn't aligned to the ways and the love of God, and this would cause strain and strife in family relationships.¹

Here today, in America, we may not experience the same kind of persecution or hardship for our faith as did those first Christians, although plenty in our world still do. But we do have one thing in common with the early Christians and with the family of Abraham that we read about in Genesis today, and that common thing is fear. Fear makes us do all sorts of damaging things to ourselves, to those we love, and to people we don't even know.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 120

We may not be living in fear of persecution or famine, but how many of us are scared to death of people finding out what our life is really like? How much energy do we expend trying to keep a failing marriage or crumbling finances, problems with the children or health issues, locked up in an emotional vault so that no one will know about our “recent unpleasantness?”

Last week, I talked about the pressure we feel to appear perfect, and I think it’s worth revisiting. Why do we try so hard to appear competent, talented, and successful, fearing what people will think if they really knew how things are?

It’s what a friend of mine calls the fear of being “found out.”² Found out that we’re not as put together, smart, or care-free as we’d like to project. Found out that we have some problems - that like Sarah we get jealous and territorial, like Hagar we let our pride rule our actions, and like Abraham we turn a blind eye to conflict.

What is it that lies at the bottom of all this fear of being found out? Are we afraid of rejection? Of the unknown? Of our own insignificance? And that we are not in control of any of these things?

Jesus says, “Have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known...even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not fear the teacher, or the master,...or the boss, or the next-door neighbor. Do not fear your now successful college roommates who have more than you, or the person who critiques your work or your lifestyle or your parenting skills.

Do not fear them, Jesus tell us, because there is nothing to be afraid of. God has counted our every hair, our every wrinkle, our every cell, and we are loved. Not for who we think we should be, but for who we really are. And God wants only our love in return, not our perfection.

And I am convinced that loving God in return means doing all we can to clear away whatever prevents us from being that person God created us to be. This may mean ending a toxic relationship, walking into a twelve-step program, quitting a lifeless job. Telling our truth. This may also mean letting go of people we love, but even then we are not to fear, because we are promised that what we lose for God’s sake we shall find again, returned to us more alive and healthy than ever before.

On my first Sunday here, I invited all of you to name your dreams, your hopes...and your desires for this community. I believe that these dreams of our hearts do come from the heart of God, yearning for us to be the unique people we were created to be. Our fears, and the things, habits, relationships that we cling to because of them, whether for comfort or security or secrecy, stand in the way of our relationship with God, and what God intends for us. They also stand in the way of our dreams.

Today, Carla Hunt is going to be leaving us, moving on to Christ Ascension to answer God’s call to be formed for ministry as a Vocational Deacon. She is, in a very real sense, doing just what

² See commentary by Rick Morley, www.rickmorley.com/archives/3071

Jesus is talking about...making a break with her “church” family, losing a life she has known and grown accustomed to, so that person God created her to be can live more fully. In a few weeks, Martha Burford will be “losing” the life she has embraced here with us, as well, in order to follow God’s call.

Do you think that Carla and Martha are afraid? I imagine so. Do you think they worry that they will be “found out,” won’t live up to the expectations of others, or the ones they have for themselves? I’ll bet they do!

And yet, they have taken the leap of faith to live in to the dreams that God has implanted in their hearts...letting go even of the good things they love, even this “functional” family of faith that has shown them God’s love and enabled them to be who they truly are.

Families are complicated, life is messy, and swords are unpleasant to say the least. Hagar and Sarah and Abraham did not know what God would do next. The early Christians did not know how life would turn out. We don’t know or understand everything either. But if God could use Abraham’s crazy family, if God could use the ever-doubtful disciples and fearful early Christians in all their dysfunction, perhaps we can trust that the God of love, who hears and sees it all, intends to do something awesome with our complicated lives as well.

Amen