

The Truth Sets Us Free

Leo Tolstoy wrote, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Today’s readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and Matthew’s Gospel both speak to troubled families. Let’s begin with what Genesis tells us about the household of Abraham.

Two weeks ago, I mentioned that Abraham wasn’t much of a husband. Our recent readings have glossed over the more dubious episodes in Abraham’s story. We missed seeing Abraham save himself when his wife Sarah got kidnapped into a local ruler’s harem – twice. God rescued Sarah and returned her to Abraham, who might or might not have welcomed the reunion but undoubtedly appreciated the riches the mortified rulers showered upon him to appease God’s wrath. We missed seeing Sarah, devastated by her own infertility, arrange for Abraham to sleep with her maid Hagar in hopes of giving Abraham a son. Abraham could have refused, but he didn’t. Last week, we heard Sarah laugh incredulously when a visiting angel promised her a child, but we didn’t discuss why being asked about it frightened her. Let’s just say that I don’t think she was afraid of God. This morning, we see Sarah worrying that Hagar’s son Ishmael will steal her son Isaac’s inheritance. She asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. It’s not a very nice request but, in a culture where the firstborn son inherited twice as much as his younger brothers, we can understand why Sarah might resent seeing the long-awaited son of her marriage to Abraham receive only half of what might go to Hagar’s boy. God understands and tells Abraham to grant Sarah’s request. Although distressed to lose Ishmael – he seems totally unconcerned about Hagar – Abraham does as he’s told, but not kindly or well. Abraham is a very wealthy man who could, presumably, provide Ishmael and his mother with money to support them in their new life. Instead, he sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert with a single waterskin and one loaf of bread. Fruitful or not, Abraham’s family is not a happy one.

Unhappy families weren't just a phenomenon of Biblical times. The marriage and divorce rates in our country have both declined but, according to *Forbes*, about half of first marriages still end in divorce; second and third marriages fail much more often. Lack of commitment is the top reason for divorce, but infidelity and domestic abuse are right up there, along with basic incompatibility, financial problems, and substance abuse. According to *Psychology Today*, divorce can traumatize kids, especially when their divorced parents remain indefinitely at war. But there are plenty of other factors that make for an unhappy family. Addiction, infidelity, domestic violence, financial issues, serious illness, racial trauma, marital or intergenerational conflict, and sudden death can all devastate a family. And when a family insists on keeping its problems a secret the consequences can be dire, destroying relationships, demolishing trust, and burdening vulnerable family members with lasting psychological and spiritual wounds.

This is when I want Jesus to appear out of nowhere, wave his hand, and effortlessly make everything all right for everyone. Walking on water and multiplying loaves and fishes is all well and good, but Jesus's healing talents seem especially needed by families in turmoil. Shouldn't the man who stilled a raging storm at sea bring reconciliation to conflicted families? I would certainly hope so. But when instructing his twelve closest friends before sending them out to spread the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus is very clear that he fully expects to bring conflict between parents and children, even to the point where "one's foes will be members of one's own household." Or, to quote one of his most memorable and disturbing lines, Jesus tells his disciples that he comes "not to bring peace, but a sword."

Researching this sermon, I sincerely hoped to find that Jesus didn't actually say anything about a sword. Luke's Gospel tones it down to "division," but Matthew disappoints. The word Jesus uses in Matthew's Gospel, *machaira* (μάχαιρα), refers to a short sword or dagger mainly

used for stabbing or, more figuratively, an instrument used to exact retribution. Lovely. Something shorter than a sword, but no less deadly. Isn't there enough conflict in the world already, Jesus? What good could come from bringing still more?

Commentators who don't seem to like Matthew's phrasing any more than I do have struggled to give Jesus's words a more palatable interpretation. 17th century Bible scholar John Gill theorized that Jesus's "sword" was a metaphor for the Gospel itself, which would separate the faithful from the worldly. John Calvin agreed, predicting that the Gospel would invigorate the impiety of the wicked, serving like a war trumpet "to call innumerable enemies to arms." They're probably right, if a trifle melodramatic. It also seems significant to me that the conflict Jesus describes is entirely intergenerational, younger family members quarrelling with their elders. As we've seen elsewhere, Jesus isn't the Messiah that prophecy had predicted. He was bound to inspire quarrels between those who clung to traditional beliefs and those who were willing to embrace the new and unexpectedly wonderful.

Some Bible scholars argue that Jesus isn't saying that he himself will bring conflict; he's just predicting that conflict will occur. I'm not sure his language entirely supports that argument, but there's no denying that religion has been and remains a hot button. For whatever reason, it's remarkably difficult for people to live and let live when they disagree about religion. From the Crusades through the Holocaust and the Troubles in Ireland to ongoing battles between the Israelis and Palestinians, people fight hard when they feel the need to defend their faith. Jesus was very perceptive; he undoubtedly knew how strongly people would disagree about his teachings and how far they'd go to make sure their opinions prevailed.

But when it comes to family conflict, we're wise to consider what else Jesus said in this morning's Gospel: "nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will

not become known.” The drama in Abraham’s family around fertility and inheritance played out in front of his entire household. Everyone knew perfectly well how Abraham’s sons were conceived and how badly Sarah and Hagar got along. They would have gossiped about the squabbles, perhaps taking sides between the two women. They would certainly have watched how Abraham handled the situation, judging his every misstep, of which there were plenty. There would be no secrets about their patriarch’s life in that insular community.

Our modern way of life offers us more privacy than Abraham and Sarah had. That may not be an entirely good thing. People are just as willing to gossip and judge one another today as they were in Biblical times, so it’s understandable that some of us prefer not to wash our dirty linen in public. But family secrets tend to be especially ugly. They fester when hidden but thank God, the truth always comes out. The abusive, unfaithful, or spendthrift spouse, the neglectful or addicted parent, is inevitably discovered, though it sometimes takes far longer than it should. In the meanwhile, keeping painful family secrets inflicts a world of hurt on suffering people who are too afraid or ashamed to ask for help. When the truth is revealed, as Jesus promises it will be, there may be embarrassment or pain. But there’s also an opportunity for troubled souls to mend. Dark secrets lose a lot of their power when they’re exposed to the light.

Unhappy families don’t have to stay that way. Whether we tell the truth about our own family troubles or learn how others have suffered in silence, we can pray for everyone involved. We can resist the urge to gossip or condemn and, without excusing wrongdoing, we can offer support and comfort. We can help those who’ve suffered to put their shame aside so they can heal. In the Gospel of John, Jesus promised that the truth would set us free, and Jesus never lies. So, when the time comes for our whispered truths to be proclaimed from the housetops, may our unburdened hearts sing with relief and joy. Amen.