

Todd R. Allen
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Interim Pastor/Head of Staff
Ordinary Time

June 25,
12th Sunday,

“Getting Past the Past”

Text: Genesis 21:8-21
Romans 6:1-11

Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. ⁹ But Sarah saw that (Ishmael), the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking him, ¹⁰ and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. ¹² But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring^[a] will be reckoned. ¹³ I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.”

¹⁴ And so, early the next morning, Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she^[b] began to sob.

¹⁷ God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. ¹⁸ Lift the boy

up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. ²¹ While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

⁴ We were, therefore, buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we, too, may live a new life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with,^[a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin – ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that what I say, and that we think—and then do—would all bring You the glory that You alone are due, through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

“And Isaac grew and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac, his son, was weaned, but when Sarah saw that Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking her son Isaac, 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.’”

And so, Abraham rose early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder along with the child, and she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. And when the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes and sat down a good way off, saying ‘Do not let me look on the death of the child.’”

What kind of family is this?

Many words can come to mind. To use the term dysfunctional—that term we use so often today—would only be a start. And if we were to leave the story right here—in the choking dust and heat of Beersheba—we might well wonder if those who describe the Bible as a cruel and bloodthirsty saga have a point—after all, it is God who tells Abraham to obey Sarah’s demands. What kind of a God is this? And what Abraham does here is sure to scar his son for life as well, if not even to end his life—and so, what kind of a father is this? Yes, if we remember that Hagar had served as a surrogate mother for Sarah because of Sarah’s inability to bear children and that Hagar and Abraham had become parents of this healthy baby boy, a boy named Ishmael—we must shudder: For, here, is flesh of Abraham’s flesh—blood of his blood—and, yet, here is that same flesh of his flesh--and blood of his blood—who is being cast aside.

What kind of family....is this?

This family story doesn't end here—and thankfully so: *“And God heard the voice of the boy”* we read, *“and the angel of God called to Hagar saying, ‘do not be afraid, for I will make a great nation of him.’ Then God opened Hagar’s eyes, and she saw a well of water, and she got up and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up...”*

And, yet, friends, there is even more to this family story—and let me to read to you from Genesis, Chapter 25, beginning at verse seven:

“Altogether Abraham lived one hundred and seventy five years. And then Abraham breathed his last... and was gathered to his people...and his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre, in the field of Ephron, son of Zohar the Hittite, the field that Abraham had brought from the Hittites....”

Here is how the story ends, friends: It ends with Ishmael and Isaac coming together to say farewell to their father—to bury him and to mourn him—and it ends with God keeping God’s promise to make out of Ishmael a great nation—in all , Ishmael will have twelve sons, all of whom become princes, we are told later in this same chapter.....

What kind of a family is this? *It’s a family that has now been healed, by the grace of God. It’s a family—let me suggest--that has gotten past the past...*

Now, how did this healing come about? About this the Bible is silent—we are not given details--but would it be too much to suggest that this re-union was what Abraham—as a father--had longed for, all of his life? And would it be too much to suggest that this re-union was also what Ishmael—as a son—had longed for as well, in spite of all blessings he had enjoyed in his married life? Which of us has not been scarred in this life? And which of us does not want to be whole again? Which of us does not want to be at healed—at within

ourselves—at peace with those around us, too? With our families?
With our friends?

Here—I hope and pray—are the desires that we all have—and here—in this story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar—we find a story filled with high hopes—with a deep desire for peace and for wholeness—*and, yet, this same story shows how human actions can go against God’s designs and can work to deeply hurt other people deeply—but—again—this is not the end of the story: No—and thanks to Chapter 25--we see—in the end—how God’s saving power can work through these same events, to bring healing—to bring wholeness.*

Are we intrigued? Well, if we are, this Old Testament passage—when combined with Paul’s words to the church in Rome—can give us this roadmap to wholeness: Indeed, if you and I want to be made whole, friends, we must do three things :

First, we must own the past—we must recognize it for what it is, and for what it has done.

Second, we must forgive those things in the past that need forgiving.

And, third, we must give the future over to God—trusting in God to transform that future...

Three things....

Now, owning the past—the first step--is not always as easy as it might be—especially the hurtful parts of it; many people, for instance, choose to deny pain—they pass lightly over how they have felt rejected or unloved and—in doing so--they have problems being set free from it. It’s a bit like owning a car with a malfunctioning engine. Until the problem is tracked down and fixed, well, it doesn’t matter how much other work is done to car—how often it is

cleaned and waxed, for instance. The car will still have a malfunctioning engine...

I lost my father—as many of you may know—to suicide over 20 years ago. It was one of the most—if not, the most—traumatic events of my life. It was also the first time that I entered into professional counseling.

My father was a good and upright man, a man with high standards, a man who achieved a great deal, and I grew up with some expectations upon my shoulders, expectations--let me suggest--that became onerous for me, because, well, I was different than my father. But what child doesn't want to please their parent—to do what they can to earn their affection--the acceptance they so desperately crave? No child! But when my father died, professional counseling led me to admit—really for the first time in my life—how much those expectations had shaped my life—driven it—and even damaged it.

Today there are many groups that deal with family problems, and they operate with the understanding that when one person in a family has a problem, all the rest of the family share in this same problem, in one way or another. The aim of these groups to identify the problem, to own it, and then to move past it. But identifying these things, however, is not all that needs to be done; in fact, one of the founders of the Co-Dependency movement--Jane Middleton Moz--has said that things have gone too far in some of these groups. She points out that many of these groups are allowing individuals to avoid personal responsibility, and here I quote her:

“If you remain in a dynamic of defining yourself as damaged, you have not recovered...”

“If you remain in a dynamic of defining yourself as damaged—you have not recovered.”

If we remain in a dynamic of defining ourselves as broken people—whether in our individual or corporate lives—we have not recovered, indeed, we will not recover—and so, there is a second

step to getting past the past: We must take responsibility for our lives by letting go of the past—and by letting go, friends, I mean that you and I need to forgive what needs to be forgiven and—let me add to this thought; We also need to celebrate what deserves to be celebrated.

What does it mean to forgive something? It means, quite literally, to forget the something. To hold it of no account. It means to say that the something has no practical effect any longer on what it is happening now, or upon what will happen tomorrow. To speak personally, it means that if after my father's death I could say father's expectations gave me an inferiority complex, for instance, it means that—now—I am able to say, *"I forgive my father for this pain he caused me and now I strike this out and act as if it never happened."* It means—now—and to add some detail here—that I take responsibility for whether I seek the approval of others through what I do--like most children do--or whether I do what I think should be done regardless of what other people think about it. Do you see the difference? If we are to move past the past, we must take responsibility by no longer blaming the past—we must live as people who are truly free from it. In the words of Richard Fairchild, *"moving towards wholeness demands that I take responsibility for myself in this life, it means that I am accountable only to God—and to God's mercy--for what I do."*

Taking this step is often discouraged by our society, however. We're surrounded by magazines that debate whether we are the products of our environment or our genetics—whether crime and poverty are produced by where we grow up, or by who our parents are—and, of course, most of the talk shows today grab a much bigger audience when all the sleazy details of someone's past life are paraded rather than what these same individuals are doing—here and now--to move beyond that past life.

What's wrong with above? Well, what's missing from the debate is the concept of freedom that Paul speaks to us about today, in his letter to Romans! What is this freedom? What does it look like? It is the freedom, Paul declares, that God gives to us when we join ourselves to Jesus Christ—and it is the freedom to choose right and

wrong, and it is also the freedom to live as whole people, friends, because Jesus the Christ died and rose again for us—because Jesus Christ died and rose again, for us.....

This is what Romans 6 is all about, and this is why we have this passage in tandem with our reading from Genesis today in the Lectionary: Paul tells the citizens of Rome—and he tells us—that we do not have to be slaves to the past, to be “slaves to sin”, as he puts it. We no longer have to be this way, friends—and we no longer have to be this way because—as Paul tells us--in Christ Jesus we have been made alive to God!

Now, what do we have to do to get on with this “new life?” Nothing more—and nothing less--than this: We need to be willing to die with Christ—all so that you and I may rise with him. It means—and let me more precise here—that you and I must have the willingness to die as he died—that we must be willing—as Jesus was willing--to love and forgive those who have hurt us AND to believe that our failures are also forgiven by God....

Here is the Good News of Jesus Christ—and is there really any better news? It is the news that you and I are set free--by Him! It is the news that we are set free from the sins of our past—and it is also the news that we are now set free to decide to do good—and to be made whole again.... Here—yes, here—is God’s will for us—that we might be whole people....

And this wholeness is a great and glorious wonder—it is. In my own life I can say that there is now peace between me and my father. It wasn’t easy to arrive there—it took years, to be honest--but I can tell you, today, that my pride in his achievements has grown over these years. I can tell you that my empathy for his struggles has also taken root. I can tell you that my understanding of myself has also increased, that my respect for parents has also been greatly enhanced, that my life—today!--is so much more the way God intends it to be....through forgiving what needed to be forgiven—through also celebrating what needs to be celebrated....

Which leads me to the third and final step—and here it is: If you and I want to be made whole, we must—finally--submit our future to the love of God, trusting in God to transform the days ahead.

Back to our Old Testament story for a moment. Here we see Hagar and Ishmael leave the camp of Abraham. We see them go into the desert. And our hearts are surely touched—by despair—as we see their water—and then their food—run out....

But God's heart is touched, too—indeed, what do we see? God calls out to Hagar, friends—and then God opens her eyes so she may see may life-giving water before her. Yes, here is what happens in the story, and note this water is not seen by Hagar before God point it out to her—but point it out, God does! In short, what was not seen before is now seen, and it is laid hold by Hagar and it is the means through which Ishmael is only saved, but Ishmael also later grows, strong and true—that he goes on to become the father of the twelve sons mentioned before, and—finally--together with Isaac—that he will come to bury his father at Machpelah.

And let me pull this apart a bit more, given the three steps I've mentioned today: What happens here? Ishmael's relationship with his father is not ended, friends: It is transformed. Is the past changed, though? No--what Abraham did to Ishmael remains a fact of history—this fact cannot be changed. But its killing hold over the life of Ishmael and Abraham—this—this! --is what is changed. It's hold is broken. Abraham's two sons are able to move into another future—together.....

We, too, can have this transformation. In fact, it's no coincidence that Hagar sees life-giving water in our story today—and it is no coincidence, friends, because—in our lives as Christians—there is life-giving water to be found.

How so?

We find it first when we immersed in baptism—when we are baptized into the death of Jesus, all so we might be raised with

him, raised to new life. *But there is more: As you and I walk along in this new life, and as we so often stumble—the power of that water is not diluted, friends, because God’s grace and mercy never run out: And so, we remain no longer slaves to the past, indeed you and I can celebrate what is good and life-giving in our past... We are given this choice, each and every day--over—and over—again—by the hand of our merciful, and loving God--*

What are we to make of this family story, today? Well, and perhaps in advance of those summer family re-unions that we may dread a bit—or a lot—and perhaps also as you and I continue to live in times filled with so much rancor and division—and hurt—within our nation, *here—in this story—and in the teaching of Paul, friends—is the path needed for us—as individuals--and as a society--to reach true wholeness.*

All of us—in one way or another—has been scarred by life, *“but if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”*

May we be led—by the mercies of God--to take the steps necessary to get past our past, and as we move ahead in our individual and corporate lives, may we know the great and glorious wonder of the wholeness God intends for us.

Amen--and Amen.