

St. Paul's Church Healdsburg  
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell  
Proper 7 Year A, June 22, 2014

Texts: Genesis 21:8-21, Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

One of the things that my ethics professor said that has always stuck with me, is that the Church is one of the few places in which we can afford to tell the truth, because here there is always forgiveness. Christianity gives us the strength and support that we need for the truth the best option, even when it's the difficult option.

Anyone with their ears open to what society and culture has to say will hear many competing messages – GET AHEAD. WEALTH = SECURITY. IT'S A DOG EAT DOG WORLD. BEAT THE COMPETITION BEFORE IT BEATS YOU. Most often these messages are incentive NOT to tell the truth, especially when the truth is about our own vulnerability. Permission to tell the truth—the whole truth--can be a hard thing to come by, because the truth can be awfully difficult to both tell and to hear.

Our Scripture readings for today are among the difficult sort to hear. The story of Hagar and Ishmael is a heartbreaker, and rife with what feels terribly unfair. It's a story that carries all the makings of a tragedy! I imagine a modern practitioner of family law would have a field day with Abraham! I think it's a mistake to ignore these difficult stories from the Bible when they come up in our lectionary cycle, and so I promise I'll get back to it – but first we need to hear some good news from the Gospel.

But is it good news today? Our Gospel passage is far from the easy, feel good variety! Jesus is talking about truth – about how ultimately the truth will prevail – but it won't always be welcomed. Jesus is saying that the truth of what will happen to those who follow him, won't be pleasant.

Believe it or not, Jesus is actually giving his disciples a pep talk here. It doesn't sound very encouraging to our ears, because he's telling them the truth of what being his disciples will cost them. He's saying, if those people out there hate me so much, how do you think they're going to feel about you who choose to follow me? If they're willing to call me all kinds of ugly names and say I'm up to no good, what do you think they are going to say about you, my disciples? They aren't going to like you any better than they like me, and you are going to be treated as badly as me, if not worse! He lays all of this out for them truthfully. And he also says, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of the truth.

If you think about it, telling someone not to be afraid can only be effective if there is absolute honesty about what it is they are up against. Denial doesn't work here at all! Preparing someone for a scary situation only works if the person knows what they're in for. Jesus understands this, which is why he's upfront and honest about what the disciples are going to have to face, and it isn't going to be pretty. Not only are they going to face the same kind of bad treatment Jesus faced and be hated by the same people who hated him, but along the way they are also going to incur hostility and resistance from within their own families. The decision to be Jesus'

disciples is going to cause friction and upheaval on every level of their lives, and it's going to be a tremendous sacrifice.

But, Jesus also says that it will be all right – do not fear. Look at what is going to happen to you with open eyes, and don't be afraid of those who can kill the body – because they don't deserve your fear – so don't let yourselves be manipulated by their fear tactics. Rather, the only one you should let determine your actions, the only one worthy of your fear and your respect, is the keeper of your body *and your soul*. The only one worthy of fear is God. And so the good news of this brutally honest message is that there is nothing to fear, because God loves you and his love is all that matters.

Remember that Matthew is writing this not only about the disciples, but he's also writing for the disciples. He's writing in the very early age of the church when the disciples of Jesus are being thrown out of the synagogues, and thrown out of their families. They are choosing to be a part of terribly controversial and disruptive movement, and in our passage today Jesus is speaking to them, saying: stay the course. Don't be afraid of the mob coming at you with stones in their hands, but think instead of the keeper of your soul. And don't be afraid to tell the truth. "What I say now quietly to you, don't be afraid to shout out loud for all the world to hear," he says. "Let the truth be known plainly in the light of day. Don't be afraid."

Because remember what the truth will do? It will set you free. ("If you are my disciples you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." John 8:31-32) It will set you free from the fear that insists we tow the party line, or the fear that makes us preoccupied about getting ahead because if we don't we'll slip behind, or the fear tells us it's alright to ignore the truth of someone else's situation (or their desperation) in life.

We all know that it can be difficult to tell the truth, and that we're supposed to do it anyway. But telling the truth is only half the battle – because it's also hard to hear the truth. It's difficult of course when it's something we don't want to believe about ourselves – like I've hurt someone, I've acted selfishly or cowardly, or even that I'm annoying when I do certain things (that I may do often!). Hearing the truth calls for humility and strength, and then it calls for the courage to move on in life and make an effort to do better while at the same time understanding that none of us will ever be perfect.

But there are also times when the truth we don't want to hear is a good truth about us – about our potential, but a potential that we don't want to face or are afraid to face for some reason. Think of a person who is afraid of intimacy, because they sense that if they let themselves, they will love from such a deep place in the core of their being that there will be no going back. They will be changed forever, and that scares them. So instead, they are willing to carry on a surface identity of self-centeredness while hiding the truth of a deep capacity to love. That is an example of how an unrecognized truth becomes a missed opportunity to grow into a person's full potential as a human being.

And missed opportunities brings me back to our difficult story of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael.

Abraham is acting on faith in what God is telling him to do. This story comes right before more well known sacrifice of Isaac, and both times Abraham overcomes

his reservations and without questioning God does what he is directed to do. This is a scary Old Testament faith that is only possible when God speaks directly to people, as God only does in the Old Testament. And in the end, things turned out all right. Ishmael survives and according to legend goes on to be the patriarch of Islam.

But what I want to ask of a story like this, is how might things have turned out differently? Is there any way things might not have come to this terrible point of rejection and abandonment? None of them are in an enviable or easy position – not Abraham, not Sarah, and certainly not Hagar. What if they had felt less afraid of one another and been able to talk honestly? Is there any way that the sons of Isaac and the sons of Ishmael might have been brothers instead of separate nations? How might this story have turned out differently? How might this world have turned out differently if these two sons of Abraham had *not* been pitted against one another in this either/or proposition?

The difficult truth is that sometimes we are jealous, and act without enough care of the consequences for others.

The difficult truth is that sometimes we let ourselves be influenced by things we shouldn't – by peer pressure and fear of what someone else will think of us.

The difficult truth is that sometimes we make decisions more out of fear than out of faith.

The Good news is that there is another way.

The Good news is that the Truth of Jesus Christ sets us free to be Children of God, sisters and brothers to one another, and disciples of love. Jesus wants that truth to be the only truth that matters for us, because in the end it is the only truth.