

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2026 • 10:30am
Trinity Episcopal Church • New Orleans, LA

The Rev. E. Gary Taylor

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, Amen.

Happy Father's Day! Anyone else think those are a bizarre set of readings for Father's Day?

Jesus pitting a man against his father, an Old Testament father casting his child and the child's mother out into the wilderness? I don't think the designers of our lectionary considered this secular holiday of Father's Day in their plan, but who knows? Relationships with fathers are often complicated. Some people think of their fathers with gratitude and affection.

Others carry wounds, disappointment, or grief. Most of us, if we're honest, carry a mixture of all of these. And, of course, our faith tradition is full of father language.

We pray to our father. We hear Jesus speak of the Father from whom all things come. Last week, Lex reminded us that many people imagine God as something like Zeus or perhaps Santa Claus, an older man in the sky somewhat randomly dispensing rewards and punishments to humanity.

But Jesus paints a very different picture. The God Jesus reveals is not distant or indifferent, not waiting to catch us being naughty or nice. God is as close as our breathing, intimately involved in our lives.

We are known. We are seen. We are treasured.

God, who knows us so completely, invites us to trust him completely. Perhaps because I had a wonderful father and many older male mentors who guided me, challenged me, and loved me into becoming my best self, it's always been easy for

me to imagine God as the ideal dad, one who loves without reservation, treasures us for who we are, and remains present through every struggle. But good parents do something else as well.

One of the challenges I face as head of school is helping parents give their children an appropriate amount of independence. Love can easily lead to anxiety and fear. Many feel compelled to protect their children from every disappointment, every danger, every failure, to solve problems for them, to make sure nothing bad ever happens.

But when parents control too much, protect too much, they are subtly communicating something damaging to their child. I don't think you can do this. Good parents have to let go.

They have to trust. They have to allow their children to become who they were created to be. I'm reminded of a kind of strange analogy.

I am a devoted but somewhat hapless golfer. In the golf swing, if you try to control the swing too much, grip the club too tightly, try to steer the ball off the club, the results are truly awful. I've been there, I know.

The best golf swings are fluid, relaxed, confident that the ball will go where it should go, and that if it doesn't go exactly where you want, that's okay. Golfers even talk about releasing the club through the swing, not letting it go from your hands entirely, but holding it loosely. Ben Hogan compared it to holding a bird, letting your muscles and joints flow naturally through the ball, trusting an outcome you can't really control.

When you swing like that, the ball leaps off the club and it feels really, really good. That feeling, which comes only very occasionally, is one of the main reasons many of us play. In a strange way, that's exactly what's happening in our Old Testament lesson.

Abraham might be the ultimate father figure in scripture. He's the father of Israel and Ishmael, the patriarch claimed by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Ishmael, you'll remember, is whom the Muslims see as their primary ancestor, in line with Abraham and the other prophets from our Old Testament.

Yet, Abraham is anything but perfect. He's anxious, uncertain, often confused, and frequently afraid. Still, what ultimately defines Abraham is not perfection, but trust.

Our reading comes from a painful chapter in Abraham's life. Years before Isaac is born, Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's slave, had a son at Sarah's urging to provide Abraham with an heir that she could not. The son was Ishmael.

For years, Ishmael was Abraham's only child and Abraham loved him. But then, against all odds, Isaac arrives and conflict erupts within the family. Sarah insists that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away, and if mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.

Abraham is devastated. This is not a neat story. It's not a comfortable story.

It's the story of a father being forced to release someone he loves. Yet, in the middle of Abraham's distress, God speaks to not be distressed. And then, when Hagar and Ishmael find themselves abandoned in the wilderness, terrified and without hope, God speaks again, don't be afraid.

The same God speaks to both sides of the conflict. The same God sees Abraham's anguish and Hagar's despair. The same God remains faithful to Isaac and to Ishmael.

That detail matters because what we discover throughout scripture is that God is always larger than the categories we create. Larger than our fears. Larger than our assumptions about who belongs and who does not.

And perhaps that's where today's gospel begins to intersect with the Genesis story. Matthew 10 is sometimes called the missionary discourse. It's the second of

Matthew's great teaching sections where Jesus prepares his disciples to go out into the world.

What is striking is that Jesus does not promise success. He promises difficulty. He promises misunderstanding.

He promises conflict. He even warns that his followers following him is likely to disrupt some of the closest human relationships we have. These words sound harsh to modern ears, but Matthew's gospel was written for a community that had already experienced these realities.

Many early Christians had paid a price for their faith. Families had been divided. Communities had been fractured.

Lives had been disrupted or even sacrificed. Jesus is telling them and us that discipleship is not primarily about comfort. It's about trust.

We often think of power as control. We think strength means invulnerability. We imagine faith means certainty.

But Jesus offers another vision. Discipleship is not the preservation of our comfort or control. It's our ongoing willingness to learn, to grow, to risk, and to trust God with the future.

It's the art of seeking the kingdom of God with single-minded determination and letting the chips fall where they may. That's what Abraham is learning. That's what Hagar is learning.

That's what the disciples are learning. And that's what we're still learning. Because God's intimate involvement in our lives is both a comfort and a claim.

It's comforting to hear Jesus say that we're worth more than many sparrows. It's comforting to think that every hair on our head is counted and we've been known

since we were in the womb. It's comforting to know that God sees us in our wilderness like he saw Hagar.

But the claim is this. If God really knows us that well, if God really loves us that deeply, then perhaps we can trust him more than we trust ourselves. Perhaps we can loosen our grip on the illusion of control.

Perhaps we can stop trying to manage every outcome. Perhaps we can let go of our fear and risk loving more generously, serving more boldly, forgiving more freely, following more faithfully. The remarkable thing about Abraham is not that he ever doubted.

He doubted all the time. Faith in scripture is never certainty. It is obedience in the presence of uncertainty.

The remarkable thing about Abraham is that somehow he kept saying yes, not perfectly, not without anxiety, but faithfully. And it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Because he trusted, generations yet unborn received blessing.

Today on Father's Day, we are invited to remember that before we are anything else, before we are golfers, parents, children, professionals, leaders, or disciples, we are beloved sons and daughters of God, beloved children of the God who tells Abraham, do not be distressed, who tells Hagar, do not be afraid, the God whom Jesus reveals as a father who knows every sparrow, counts every hair, and never loses sight of a single one of his children.

So the question remains for us, is the same one Abraham faced in the wilderness and the disciples faced as they were setting into the world, will we trust God's love is large enough, wise enough, and faithful enough to carry us wherever discipleship leads? Because in the end, that's what Jesus asks of us, not certainty, not control, simply trust. Take up your cross then in his strength and calmly, every danger brave, it gives you abundant life and leads to victory over the grave.

May we have the courage to do so. Amen.