



MYERS PARK  
BAPTIST  
CHURCH

A faith community  
on a journey seeking  
a welcoming, loving,  
and just world.

## “THE PAIN OF BETRAYAL”

Sermon Delivered by Dr Reverend Tim Moore  
Genesis 21:8-21, June 21 2026  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

In a couple of weeks many of us will read Thomas Jefferson’s most famous document—The Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all . . . are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Our nation was founded on these ideals. And yet, while these lofty ideas drove the narrative of our nation’s beginning, **as Thomas Jefferson was writing the Declaration, back at Monticello no less than 165 enslaved, and societally unequal, persons were working his farm,** so that he could be free to write his lofty words. Earlier in his career Jefferson had advanced ideas about the abolition of slavery and in court defended a man seeking his freedom, based on a natural law argument that “everyone comes into the world with a right to his own person and using it at his own will. This is what is called personal liberty, and is given him by the author of nature.” Jefferson lost the case and apparently his moral will as well [Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson*, 49). Over the span of his life Jefferson owned more than 600 slaves, a majority of whom were born into slavery on his lands. At any one-time Jefferson usually owned about 200 enslaved persons, **meaning that a significant portion of his wealth came through the selling of persons born as property into his care. Whatever early conscience he had about the immorality of slavery, he betrayed those principles in order to build and maintain his glorious Monticello and the lifestyle that came with it.**

While in France from 1787-89, serving as our nation’s envoy he brought with him his two daughters and their enslaved maid, Sally Hemings. **Sally was also the half-sister to his late wife. While in Paris, Jefferson began a sexual relationship with her. She was pregnant when they left Paris.** This was 6 years after his wife’s death; he met his wife when she was 20 years old and Sally was now 16. Sally was the daughter of an enslaved woman and Mrs. Jefferson’s father, and her mother was the daughter of a white man and an African woman. Years later, Jefferson’s grandson wrote that Sally was “light colored and decidedly good-looking” [Meacham, 217]. Did her presence remind him of his dead wife? Or was it just about power-over and lust? Or something else? We can never really know.

**Hemings gave birth to seven children by Jefferson, four of whom lived into adulthood.** Out of a promise Sally extracted from Jefferson in Paris, he freed her children when they reached the age of 21. When they were freed, Jefferson's enslaved children were given meager provisions and never publicly recognized by him. **A man who wrote volumes and who is remembered still today by his words never wrote a single sentence about Sally and then enslaved children she bore to him. Jefferson didn't just betray Sally and his own children; he betrayed his own values, and it shamed him into silence.**

The Abraham and Sarah story about Hagar and Ishmael is so repulsive that I struggled to find a way to help you grasp it. Then, I pulled three books on Jefferson from the shelves in my library. If you think I'm stretching things to compare this story from Genesis to Jefferson a few weeks before our nation marks its 250th anniversary, listen to this: In the spring of 1788 Jefferson traveled to Dusseldorf for diplomatic work on behalf of the new nation. While there he "was fascinated by a 1699 painting of Abraham taking the young servant Hagar to his bed. . . . The picture Jefferson [wrote], was 'delicious. I would have agreed to have been Abraham'" [Meacham, 215; Halliday, *Understanding Thomas Jefferson*, 99-101]. **A month later he returned to his two daughters and Sally Hemings in Paris, and Abraham he became.**

Stories of betrayal are painful because they are about the rupture of relationships or closely held values. You can't betray your enemies. You hate them; they hate you, and you expect the worst. If there's no trust, there's no betrayal. **You can only betray your family or friends, or yourself or God, because trust must be established before you can betray it.**

This is why stories of betrayal are so painful. They testify that an important relationship was violated, a promise made, or deep values of your heart and soul. **They shame us into silence as they did Jefferson. We don't like to talk about them. They become our secrets.** Which leads to a very important question for this week and next week's readings: Why did ancient Israel keep these stories, remember their ancestor, Abraham?

Abraham had taken Sarah's Egyptian servant-girl, Hagar in order to produce an heir. Ishmael was born. Abraham later makes Ishmael a part of his covenant with God. But when Isaac, whose name means laughter, was born to Sarah, everything changes. One day Sarah sees Ishmael laughing. The verse in your worship guide, which is the New Revised Standard Version, says that she saw Ishmael playing with her son Isaac. But the oldest Hebrew text lacks the phrase "with her son Isaac," and the verb translated as "playing" is a form of the verb "laughing." **As Phyllis Tribble notes, Sarah saw Ishmael Isaac-ing** [Tribble, *Hagar, Sarah*, 45]. That Ishmael could be a laugher, an Isaac, Sarah saw as a threat, and she tells Abraham to "cast out this slave woman with her son" [Gen 21:10].

The text tells us that Abraham found this distressing because of his son, Ishmael. However, **his anguish is mild** for when he believes that God tells him to listen to Sarah the plan for getting rid of Hagar and Ishmael quickly proceeds without so much as a peep from the mighty patriarch.

In the morning Abraham rises early, takes bread and a jug of water and places them on Hagar's shoulder along with the child as if they are taking a stroll on the Little Sugar Creek Greenway. Instead, they are sent away into the desert wilderness. **It was death sentence.**

Abraham, who was wealthy, could have sent her away with a week's worth of provisions and a donkey to carry them and it would have been nothing to him. The bread and water were an especially callous offering. They symbolized their value to him. They were wanted only when needed and became disposable when no longer desired. It was a heartless betrayal.

What are your stories of betrayal? Of your own pain? Or the pain you caused others, or did to yourself? What about this church? When has it betrayed its covenant, its values? When has it professed one thing and done another? Do we keep these stories locked away from the light of day? Secrets that lurk in the shadows?

The problem with secrets is that we live them out by the way we hide them, by the way we hide ourselves because of them. Frederick Buechner in his book, *Telling Secrets*, writes, "I not only have my secrets, I am my secrets. And you are your secrets. Our secrets are human secrets, and our trusting each other enough to share them with each other has much to do with the secret of what it is to be human" [Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, 39].

**One of the unfortunate truths of life is that we only get better by learning from our mistakes.** Which means that we have to own our mistakes, our errors, our sins, our regrets. We have to admit them to ourselves, first, then, often to others, make amends for them, learn their lessons, resolve to do better. It means we have to tell our secrets, if we are ever to be free of them. Brene Brown in her book, *Rising Strong*, writes, "The irony is that **we attempt to disown our difficult stories** to appear more acceptable, **but our wholeness actually depends on the integration of all of our experiences**, including the falls" [Brown, 38].

Whatever mistakes or betrayals we have made as individuals, or this church has made collectively, we must own them, learn from them in order to thrive past them. In Bowen Systems theory, you can change leaders, replace personnel, update policies, but until you consciously and publicly change the system you are in you will repeat mistakes of the past. Are we brave enough to talk about them—without blame—in order to choose another path?

And here's another the thing; if we attempt great things, take big risks, venture trusting others in relationships, it makes us susceptible to failure, to mistakes, to betrayal. If the lesson we take from this is to avoid risk, then we and the world are less for it. Don't allow shame or failure to paralyze you from attempting your next great thing.

To proclaim the Kingdom of God, to advocate for economic and racial justice, to work for the inclusion of all persons—especially for immigrants and those who identify with the LGBTQ community—these acts will not be victorious immediately. And anyone and any church that strives for such noble goals is going to meet failure and mistakes and betrayal. To follow Jesus in living out the Kingdom of God takes courage because it will be filled with failure.

This is why most churches just spiritualize Jesus' message into an individual salvation plan. That's a lot easier. **Facing and learning from failure is the way God changes us and the world.**

Brene Brown says that to be vulnerable by speaking with someone, some trusted one, about our secrets is one of the most courageous acts we can do. And once we learn to courageously face our own shame, it empowers us to be courageous again. Mary Daly, the pioneering feminist theologian, once said, "Courage is like—it's a habit, a virtue: You get it by courageous acts. It's like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn to courage by couraging."

Betrayed by Sarah and Abraham, cast away to certain death once their meager provisions run out, Hagar puts Ishmael under the shade of a bush to ease his suffering a little bit, while she goes a short distance away because she cannot bear to watch her son die. Then, when all hope was lost, God heard their cries and answered them. And Hagar sees a well. Water in the desert.

This basically ends the story, so an editor tells the rest of the story in a few lines, much like some movies do just before the screen credits begin scrolling down the movie screen. Hagar settles in Paran and finds Ishmael a good Egyptian girl to marry. In time Ishmael becomes a great nation of people. In the Quran, Ishmael is claimed as the father of the Arabic peoples. He and Abraham built the Kaaba in Mecca the holiest site in Islam. Muslims also consider him a direct ancestor to Muhammad.

Betrayal is not the end of life. Only if we are silenced and paralyzed by its shame will it drain the life out of us. But if we courageously look within ourselves, look to God, and face our pain—betrayed or betraying—water in the desert can be found. Friends, where you face the pain of betrayal, look for God's water in the desert. Drink deeply and continue on a journey of renewal and transformation. AMEN.