

Division and Discipleship

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39

June 22, 2008; Tim Devine

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Last week Sarah laughed. She was likable. Her reaction to having a child in her old age makes that part of the story engaging and real. This week, however, it certainly seems like a different Sarah. She is selfish and she is mean. She tells Abraham:

“Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”

Two summers ago David and I had the privilege of spending a month in Jerusalem and the lands of the Biblical narrative in its environs. Early on in this adventure we traveled south on a guided tour with an archaeologist. One of the stops that day was the Biblical site of Beersheba in the Negev desert. There is a modern Israeli city of the same name nearby. These ancient sites are called tells. And an archeological tell is usually a raised area that contains all of the rubble – building material and domestic refuse – from the previously inhabited area. It is rubble because over time the end of each era usually was because of warfare and the city was destroyed. Archeology digs through the various levels or layers often picking out broken pieces of pottery to identify the religious and cultural focus of the city at that point in time. Graves, ironically, are occasions of great celebration in archaeology because they usually have the best preserved items having escaped the warfare above ground.

It is a “tell” that is the major setting of the historical novel The Source, by James Michener. And, the word means “hill” or “mound” in both Arabic and Hebrew. And sometimes it is used simply in a descriptive way, for example the city of Tel Aviv means “hill of spring.”

The stop in Beersheba included reading the Biblical story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael that we heard today. It was a time when the location of where one reads the Bible makes a deep impression in how one understands it. It was June. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The landscape was flat. It was incredibly hot. There was no shade to be seen. In that landscape Hagar was given a death sentence. And, indeed, that is what is about to happen after their water has run out when we hear:

Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

They are rescued. God shows Hagar a spring nearby. But the severity of her exile from the family of Abraham, simply because of Sarah's jealousy, remains a significant aspect of the story. It is a story of division as well as discipleship.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew we have more of the same when we hear:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

In this instance it isn't family relationships that go sour due to jealousy, but due to ideology. Over the years I've heard different versions of the same family system where the bottom line is that when they gather for Thanksgiving they are most thankful for football because once they turn on the TV they don't have to talk to each other. It is usually religion or politics or both that put folk into separate camps that would never choose to be together if they weren't biological family.

Anytime we take a stand on anything will be offending someone. If we have never offended anyone, have we really ever said anything all that important?

I was fascinated to read something about the United Church of Christ in our ecumenical church school curriculum, Seasons of the Spirit, for this week. The author, a Canadian pastor named Bruce Sanguin, wrote this:

Has anyone been following the story of the TV advertisements of the United Church of Christ in the United States? The ad features two enormous men, standing on the front steps of a church, clearly acting as bouncers, keeping out any suspicious-looking churchgoers. The text then flashes across the screen: "Jesus didn't turn people away. Neither do we." A narrator's voice speaks: "No matter who you are, or where you are on your life's journey, you are welcome here."

The two major TV networks in the United States, CBS and NBC, were clear on the meaning: this was a church that welcomed gay and lesbian persons. They refused to air the ad on their networks because they deemed it too controversial. Translation: it would create so much backlash in the powerful evangelical lobby that they didn't want to risk running it.

There have been other repercussions for running the ad as well. The Rev. John Thomas, president of the United Church of Christ, points out that he is the first president of this denomination never to have received an invitation to the White House. The governing authorities of Yale University... announced that it was severing its last ties with the denomination. The university chapel founded by the church's congregational ancestors will become non-denominational. Thomas is convinced that this move is related to the TV ads.

If we take a stand on anything that really matters, discipleship will cause division, and the words attributed to Jesus will in some way ring true:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

As one of the more than 10,000 clergy that signed a letter stating the religion and science are compatible, I receive e-mail updates from time to time from the organizers of the “clergy letter project.” This week there is quite a bit of dismay in that group because both houses of the Louisiana state legislature have passed a veto-proof bill introducing creationism and intelligent design into the science curriculum of the Louisiana public schools. The governor of that state is said to enthusiastically support this and will sign it into law soon.

Now before we sigh or roll our eyes about a group of people far away, the group that introduced that legislation is called the Discovery Institute, and that group is based in Seattle, Washington. They are campaigning to have intelligent design taught alongside evolution using the bipartisan American spirit of being open to all perspectives. But what this really is, is an attempt by proponents of one particular religious perspective to get their religious views taught in science classes as science.

It isn’t just Louisiana’s problem, it is our problem. From time to time a writer from the Discovery Institute writes an editorial piece in the Seattle newspapers, as a local expert, and it is treated in the same way – a particular perspective. It is given more validity than it deserves when it is given that forum, and we should be protesting when this happens. Otherwise, we are no different than CBS and NBC and the UCC ad if we simply don’t want to deal with the backlash. Intelligent design is not science.

And, another topic has surfaced recently, and one that has quietly been eating at our souls over the past several years. And that is the argument that our United States government has the right to torture its prisoners. The Connecticut and New Hampshire UCC conferences, as well as all six New England conference ministers, have challenged the rest of us in the denomination to become familiar with the work of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, which is sponsoring the following pledge:

“Torture violates the basic dignity of the human person that all religions, in their highest ideals, hold dear. It degrades everyone involved – policy-makers, perpetrators and victims. It contradicts our nation’s most cherished ideals. Any policies that permit torture and inhumane treatment are shocking and morally intolerable. Nothing less is at stake in the torture abuse crisis than the soul of our nation. What does it signify if torture is condemned in word but allowed in deed? Let America abolish torture now – without exceptions.”

There will be more about this in our next church newsletter, and you can learn more online at ucc.org or nrcat.org. And, what will history say about us if this practice creeps into our nation for good and we said and did nothing? Jesus does bring a sword, but also brings peace. Not the peace of being nice at all costs, but the peace of a clear conscience and a community of support. May that harder peace be upon all of us. Amen.

Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So 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." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Matthew 10:24-39

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."

"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."