

FAMILY STORIES

a sermon by the Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley
preached at First Parish in Plymouth (Massachusetts) Unitarian Universalist

Sunday, March 18, 2001



Reading: (Excerpts from Genesis, chapters 16, 17 and 21*)

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "God has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May God judge between you and me." "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, God appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her." Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.

Now God was gracious to Sarah, and did for Sarah what was promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 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. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob. 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."

Sermon

When I was studying for the ministry, one of the expectations was that each week, the entire community would attend chapel (the worship service). Although I had been a Unitarian Universalist for more than a decade, I was still healing from the pain of my fundamentalist past, and I had not yet mustered the courage to attend chapel in this United Methodist seminary. But with the support of three Unitarian Universalist friends, one Friday toward the end of the first semester, I dragged myself to worship.

* Degenderized, hierarchical language (i.e., Lord) removed.

I wasn't sure what kind of message I would hear, but it was a week before exams, and I hoped for a place where I could center myself, and find some internal spiritual resources for the days ahead. To my surprise, there was no sermon. It was early December, and the entire liturgy focused on Advent, ending with a celebration of the Eucharist. Now I had not attended a Christian communion for over 20 years, but I tried to approach it with an open mind.

The prayer, offered by Dr. Mark Burrows, began with these words: "We, who are the children of Abraham and Sarah..." I don't recall the rest of the sentence, because in a split second, my mind went blank. It simply refused to be present to this experience that was sacred for most others in attendance. I began to weep—quietly at first—but a whimper soon turned to tears, then uncontrollable tears. My friends sat beside me trying to be supportive, but didn't have a clue what was so upsetting about that simple phrase: "We, who are the children of Abraham and Sarah?" I had no harsh feelings toward Dr. Burrows, but the moment I heard those words suggesting that I was a descendent of Abraham and Sarah, I felt the pain of exclusion.

My rational mind told me that the I should not take it literally; that the statement was merely a symbolic reference to our Jewish and Christian heritage. But that rationale didn't help. I simply could not get beyond the complex dynamics of race and class and gender in the Biblical story. I knew the story of Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis, but I *also* knew the story of Abraham and Hagar, an Egyptian woman whose ethnicity and social standing made her an outcast in ancient Israel, a stranger in a strange land.

As a woman of African heritage myself, I identified as one of *Hagar's* children, and I wondered why *she* had not been mentioned in the prayer. Was she not worthy of mention because she was a slave?

According to the story, when Hagar's son Ishmael was about 14 years old, Sarah became jealous. Hagar had sacrificed her body and her beauty. She had postponed her life in order to give this elderly couple the gift of a child. And yet, Sarah was jealous. Here were two brothers, Ishmael and Isaac, whose childhood play was, no doubt, innocent of any social or economic distinctions. And yet, Sarah's worry about inheritance spawned her jealousy, which led to a crisis in the household.

In the end, Sarah threw Hagar and Ishmael out of the house—banished them to the wilderness, with no food and only a half gallon of water. Two brothers forced apart because of a fight between their parents.



Brokenness in the family. Brokenness in our communities. Brokenness in our world. It is an old story, one that we know well. When family and social discord disrupts and threatens life, it is more than a social problem. It is a religious problem, one that calls people of faith to respond.

Born of the Enlightenment Movement, with its abiding faith in the power of human reason, many liberals are at a loss to understand or explain post-modern phenomenon such as the violence our nation has witnessed in public schools in the past few years.

School violence in Black, Latina/o and urban areas is an old problem. But until the tragedy at Columbine High School, it seems that parts of this nation were asleep. It was only when schoolyards in white suburban areas started to become graveyards that the crisis became a national wake-up call due to shootings in Paducah, Kentucky; Edinborough, Pennsylvania; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; Littleton, Colorado; and most recently, in Santee, California, and Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

We ask what is happening in our schools—why is there so much violence? But the real question is: what is happening *in our society*? In a way, it defies reason.

Reason, I suspect, is not at the top of the youth agenda today. But love is. In a fast-paced world in which many young people are not self-differentiated, but defined by the culture—as consumers (you are what you have or who you hang out with), our children are calling us. In a world of busyness that leaves little time for families to be together, children are crying out for love. In a world in which there are blended families, step families, surrogate families, families with little cohesion, it would not be surprising if many children feel confused, unsupported, or are experiencing a loss of identity.

All the evidence shows that “when children feel loved, typically, they do not express themselves in acts of violence, regardless of the external factors” competing for their attention.¹ One expert put it this way:

“children who make the decision to kill, or feel it forced upon them, do so because they are already emotionally armed and dangerous. Finding a weapon to express their rage is secondary to the primary fact of their being emotional time bombs.”²

¹ (James Shaw, author of *Jack & Jill, Why They Kill*, from an ABC News Interview, March 2001.)

² Ibid.

In a recent television interview, James Shaw, a writer who interviewed youth who are incarcerated for violent crimes explained that violence is often centered around family issues:

- a sense of alienation and isolation;
- chronic feelings of being unloved, unloving and unlovable;
- a desperate sense of feeling worthless;
- not knowing how to handle constant bullying
- not having fixed or positive role models among the adults in their lives;
- and easy access to drugs (including alcohol), and easy access to weapons—particularly guns.

Just as I suspect both Isaac and Ishmael might have felt after the breakup of their household, our children are desperately crying out for answers. The answer, I believe, is deceptively simple: When it comes to our children, love is the answer, no matter what the question. We answer all their questions to the extent that we support, love, nurture and care for our children.

Lovelessness. We blame school violence on the availability of guns. Certainly, that is a problem, but if all the guns were taken out of circulation, it would not stop the proclivity to some form of violence toward others. We look for explanations. We blame it on violence in the media—television, films, video games, and violent lyrics in popular music.” Certainly, this is part of the problem, but it is time to see the picture from a wider lens. When Cain killed his brother Abel in the biblical story, one of the first recorded stories of violence in the family, mass media (as we have today) was not there to tempt him. He did not replicate a murder he saw on television or to learn how to make a formula for death that he found on the Internet.

Of course, we need to do something about the availability of hand guns. Of course, media violence has an influence and we adults bear a responsibility for curbing both. That goes without saying. But this is not a problem from which we adults can exempt ourselves. We cannot simply blame the youth or youth culture, for we are they. They are *our* children, they come from *our* homes.

Cornel West described the problem in one of those big words: nihilism, which simply means a profound alienation that expresses itself in destructive ways. West says that it is a "monumental eclipse of hope (and an unprecedented collapse of meaning,"³ or "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness."⁴

I would argue that as a nation, we are in a deep cultural depression as well as a spiritual crisis. What is not said very much by people in the helping (professions and social critics, preachers, sociologists, teachers or others who come into intimate contact with youth) is that there is a crisis of the spirit, a crisis of faith in our society. And here I am not referring to any particular religion, but to faith in the self, faith in something higher than the self, and faith in one's family and community.

Alienation is not overcome by analysis or by programs, but by love and compassion. I believe that the emotional distancing we often see in youth can be subdued by the love ethic – not expressed sentimentally, but by valuing what young people have to say; by encouraging their participation in the things that most deeply affects their lives.

Let us recall the story of Hagar and Ishmael where we left off. A family in crisis. A woman and her son alone—out in the wilderness, homeless. No crisis hot line. No overnight shelter. No abuse counselor. She needed someone to hear her story, someone to help her figure things out—where she was going to live, how she was going to feed herself and her son. But there was no pastor, no prophet, no priest, or lay minister to help her with this problem. According to the story, in the depths of her despair, an angel appeared at Hagar's side, and asked: *where, my dear, are you coming from, and where are you going?*

That, my friends, is a question we need to ask not only of our children, but of many parents and families as well. *Where are you coming from, and where are you going?*

Families are complicated. Like Hagar and Ishmael, too many of our children and families are out in the wilderness. Even though youth may show up in the classroom day after day, teachers and administrators never know what they may be facing in their families or communities. Our youth

³ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 12-14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14

cannot make it alone! They need our love. They need to feel our arms around them wherever they may be. And they need a church that can help them to know

- that they are loved
- that they are not alone
- that they have infinite worth
- that they are connected to all of us, and all life
- that they can make a difference, and that there is joy in doing so.

Some say that the angel appearing at Hagar's side was the voice of God. Others say that it was the 'still small voice' within. I like to think of it as Love's call, asking her to reflect not only on her dilemma, but on who she was and what she was doing with her life. Love calls out to us as well, asking us to remember who we are—that we are spiritual beings, connected to something larger and more trustworthy than ourselves. The transcendent mystery and wonder of the universe asks us to call into existence that which has been forgotten: that we are that we are not here to *act as if* we are brothers and sisters, but to remember that we *really are* brothers and sisters whose very reason for being is to love and care for one another. This is the purpose of the church.

We just sang the children out, to their classes, but collectively, do you know them by name? Do we have any idea what is on their minds? If only we could commit ourselves to do the internal work necessary—with children, youth, adults, and families—to recover and integrate the lost parts of ourselves—to find the silences that lead to kids bullying kids, which leads to distancing, which leads to alienation, which leads to hopelessness and despair. If only we could recover those parts of the self that have been fragmented or suppressed. If only we could be more hospitable to each other.

This is the work of the soul. It is the work of the church. Soul work is hard work. But hospitality—hospitality of the human spirit—is what counters alienation, nihilism, and brokenness in the human family. Soul work. Hospitality. It is the work of the church. It is what ministry is—to show hospitality to the human spirit. So may it be.