

Sermon: Know your Neighbor
3 Pentecost, Year A
Genesis 21:8-21,

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Emmanuel Church, Staunton
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The beginning of today's passage from Genesis may strike the modern listener's ear as unfair, heartbreaking and just plain wrong! You may recall from last Sunday's reading that God had promised a son to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. What is left out of our Sunday lectionary is that Sarah gets impatient with God's promise; she doesn't get pregnant quickly enough and thinks that maybe she should hurry things along. So she tells Abraham to go to her slave Hagar in hopes that Hagar will become pregnant with the promised child. And Hagar does, and even flaunts it a bit with her mistress Sarah. But Sarah, too, eventually does bear a son Isaac.

Enter today's story with Sarah showing jealousy or worry that Hagar and Abraham's son Ishmael (who is not named in today's passage) will become the primary heir. "Cast her out!" Sarah commands. And if this isn't troubling enough, it seems that God sides with Sarah in a way in that God tells Abraham to go along with Sarah's wishes to cast her out. Why doesn't God just tell Sarah to behave herself? Not to be jealous but to be kind and accepting, even loving? Maybe even accept responsibility for Hagar's new situation.

It seems that in spite of the human propensity toward family discord, God enters into the complexities of human frailty bringing something new about. Don't worry about Ishmael, God says to Abraham, I will make a great nation of him also. God hears Ishmael's cry; the name Ishmael means "may God hear." God cares for the outcast. Today's story begins with discord between women and ends with God's compassion. And out of that compassion springs a beautiful promise of life, a promise of Ishmael being the patriarch of a great nation. That nation would be the lineage from which Muhammad, the founder of Islam, would be born. As Hagar and her son are on the brink of death, God saves them with water from a well.

This story is also part of the Islamic tradition although it varies a bit. In that tradition Hagar, daughter of an Egyptian king had been given by the king to Abraham as a slave. Hagar, Ishmael and Abraham go together into the desert, Abraham leaves them there with little water and an angel appears, and tells her that God has heard Ishmael's cry and provides them with water bubbling up out of the ground. The place was Mecca and became known for its abundant water supply. Hagar is honored in Islam as a matriarch.

The common threads between Judaism, Christianity and Islam are illuminated in this story. This past Monday night some more common threads between Judaism, Christianity and Islam were illuminated over tacos, enchiladas and tortilla chips. The Interfaith planning group for some local events met at Mi Rancho in Verona to discuss ideas for our future get togethers. It seems that during and after our Lenten Interfaith program this past spring, people were hungry for more time together, so some of the leaders of the five congregations have convened to find a way forward.

First we established that we wanted to meet at least four times throughout the year, once each

season, for food and fellowship. We realized that a big factor in our desire to come together was simply that we enjoyed each other's company. But I think it is also out of a deeper realization that despite the conflicts that are so often reported throughout the world between different people of color and of religion that we have so much in common. We are different and we are the same.

So what would we call ourselves? We went around and around. One bright idea was to call ourselves "Beloved Neighbors" the premise being that it is love that brings us together, and love is our aim. Some felt that this is God's mandate, that we love one another first, see one another as people *to be* loved. Then others said, what about calling ourselves Know Your Neighbor, with the acronym being KYN (Kin!) because they felt that in getting to know one another, then they could begin to love. We ended up going with the Know Your Neighbor (KYN) name as it seemed to be welcoming of all people, whether they felt that love was the motivation or goal or neither.

To know one's neighbor is to hear their story: to spend time with, to listen, to engage, to live side by side, to develop compassion toward, to begin to see differently. American writer Margaret J. Wheatley wrote, "You can't hate someone whose story you know." We want to know one another's story so that we might better know, better understand, better love our neighbors.

God's response to Hagar and Ishmael's distress, their isolation and thirst was to have compassion. And in that compassion a great promise of new life sprang forward. Who in our world do we see as outcast, as on the edge? Perhaps people in the minority who might need your compassion. Who in our own neighborhood can you reach out and get to know? Can you hear their story? Can they hear yours? I hope you will participate in the Know our Neighbor interfaith picnic that is scheduled in July. Details to come. But whatever the setting pay attention to those around you, face to face. Know your neighbor, your beloved neighbor, for they are indeed God's children, they are your kin! Amen.