

*Do not be afraid:
you are of more value than many sparrows.*

– Matthew 10:



Sunday Devotion

June 21, 2020

*Find a quiet place by yourself or
with another and come to God.*

HYMN SING For Everyone Born (#769 in the hymnal)

CALL TO WORSHIP

We have been created in the image of God

We are created to love our brothers and sisters, all children of God

Christ has taught us how to love one another

And we are called to share that love with the world

The Holy Spirit moves in us, giving us gifts to do God's work

The Spirit moves us like the wind in the trees

We go where God is leading us

Follow Jesus, and the Spirit will show us the way. Amen.

OPENING PRAYER

Most loving God, your Son, Jesus, taught us that none of our concerns lie outside your love and that no person is irrelevant or dispensable. In this time of worship, teach again the way of quiet trust, that placing all my affairs in your hands, I may live faithfully and lovingly, allowing your Spirit to guide my feet in the way of your peace. Amen.

HYMN This is My Father's World (#370 in the hymnal)

1. This is my Father's world,
and to my listening ears
all nature sings, and round me rings
the music of the spheres
This is my Father's world;
I rest me in the thought
of rocks and trees, of skies and seas,
his hand the wonders wrought.

2. This is my Father's world,
O, let me ne'er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
This is my Father's world.
The battle is not done:
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heaven be one.

CALL TO CONFESSION

We struggle daily with that human tendency to always do wrong, say hurtful things, turn our back to others. But God will never hold our sins against us or our foolish nature. Come now before God who will frees you forever from judgment, as you pray,

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

O God, Father that you are, you know what is right for me, but too often I only want my way or no way, instead of your way. Have mercy upon me when I turn from you. Forgive me when I do not realize your fatherly love and direction for me. Have mercy upon me indeed, and teach me anew how to follow you, Father that you are. I pray this through your Son, my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

This is the good news: God hears your prayers, your cries, your heart. And, in Christ, you receive new life. You are free, free to walk in the Light of the Lord. Remember that Jesus died for you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus loves you. Jesus is good to you. Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Genesis 21:8-21

⁸ The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² 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 for you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ 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!

²⁶ "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³² "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

³⁵ 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;

³⁶ and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

³⁷ 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; ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

SERMON

In 2014 Angela Abraham wrote this description in her book, "Nexus, a Treatise in Defence of Love as Mankind's Answer": "The man was obviously a father. On top of his bland suit lay a crudely knitted scarf in

neon wool. It was unusually short for an adult and somewhat thin, you couldn't help but think it would be more appropriate on a teddy bear. But without it this man was just another faceless corporate executive, two dimensional, flat. With it he was someone loved, someone so sentimental that he didn't remove it once his child was out of sight. I could just see those grey features lighting up at the end of the day to tell the nine year old he wore it all the way to work and it kept his neck toasty warm. Which, in this unseasonably warm weather, I don't doubt it did."

This is Father's Day, a day to celebrate and honor those who have loved and cared even and maybe especially when it was hard to do so. Jesus describes God as our heavenly father, or more accurately, as our heavenly "Daddy." "Abba" is the term he used in the prayer he taught his disciples. "Daddy," the term much more endearing such as a young child would use to describe the one who teaches and provides, but who also scoops up his young'un to provide broad strong shoulders upon which to sit for a better view and serves as a formidable foe to any would-be attacker all while patting a beloved back with gentle spade-like hands. Daddy, who unconditionally loves, who foolishly runs to greet the wayward child, who disciplines but quickly forgives, who hastily kisses the adventurous child running out the back door. Daddy, who loves and loves and loves with a love that endures forever. This is the heavenly Abba Daddy.

Today we hear about another father, Abraham whose name in Hebrew literally means, "Father of the nation." His name was so changed from Abram to reflect the promise God had given to him that he would have as many descendants as the stars were in the heavens. Of course, God didn't put a timeline on the descendant-giving. So round about the time when Abraham was getting up there in years, his knees were weakening and getting up from sitting on the floor playing was increasingly difficult not to mention the near impossibility of chasing after a wet naked toddler who escaped the confines of the bathtub or push a bicycle without training wheels, it's looking doubtful for the fulfillment of God's promise. And not only was Abraham getting long in the tooth, but Sarah's joints were also stiffening up from advancing arthritis and there were more and more "gray's" making "Miss Clairol" a staple on her grocery list.

Well, if God was off on vacation when it came to conception for this chosen couple, Sarah, self-appointed second in command, would step into the seemingly abdicated seat of power. She offered her servant as a surrogate to get this nation-building thing going. And it got going. Fertile-Mytle – or Hagar, in this case, got herself pregnant and a much longed-for progeny was born, Ishmael.

Next we get a story right out of "Mean Girls" or for those of us a little older, Days of Our Lives on a middle school level. Sarah is jealous and middle-school type jealousy is very powerful.

Eventually Sarah is able to conceive her own son, Isaac, which means laughter – she laughs when told she would have a child at the age of 90 – what other knee-jerk response is there? As was customary, a great party was thrown when Isaac was weaned. The usual timetable back then was about age 3. Again what else would you do but throw a party when after 3 years of nursing the "bottle" finally gets thrown out?!

It was at this party that Abraham's other son by Hagar the servant laughs at or with Isaac. It's interesting that the same verb that is used to describe Sarah's response to news of her pregnancy is used here to describe Hagar's son's behavior. Laughter. Some want to vilify the boy saying that he was making fun of his half-brother. But I think what he was doing was joining in the fun, the spirit of the celebration and that would never do as far as Sarah was concerned. He wasn't worthy to be on equal footing with the rest of the guests. He was, after all, just a *foreign* servant's child, a second class citizen. In her eyes, his rights weren't equal to that of *her* child. And so as the queen of her own castle, Sarah used her power and insisted, ordered, Abraham to get rid of the boy *and* his uppity mother.

I have often wondered what Abraham thought as he looked out into the desert. Did he shed any tears over the boy and his mother who were cast out into certain death? When he quenched his own thirst, did he ever think of the thirst they would have experienced when their meager water bottle ran dry? Surveying his own sheep with his staff in hand, did he wonder how they might be protected from predators? He didn't want to

comply with Sarah's wishes. She nagged and whined until he thought he would explode. But God had told him to go ahead and cast Hagar and the boy out. Was that really God's voice he heard, or his own inward desire to have this all go away? Sarah had been jealous. It seemed ridiculous. She was his wife. Hagar was a servant. She would never be more important to Abraham, but she did hold power – through her son. First born had all the power, according to custom. First born got all the goods. Still, Abraham had enough to go around. Isaac wouldn't be left with nothing. And yet, the first born was a servant's child – a servant's child with the power, with the name, with the promise. Is that what Sarah was worried about, or was it more like a middle school fight over a boy?

We switch the scene to Hagar. What about Hagar? She was a servant and as such she had little choice. When Sarah handed her over to old man Abraham, she had no control over her own life. She would do as she was told. She was nothing more than a means to an end. And what did she get for her complicity? Thrown out like the trash. She had no rights. In the grand scheme of things, she and her son didn't really matter to the "important" people.

Is this the kind of God we believe in? A God who allows such an injustice to happen? Certainly it fits the ugly real world as we as we are seeing on the front burner right now. Racist jealousy and cruelty has not been exactly absent during the last sixty years since the Civil Rights movement in the 60s. It just hasn't been as visible or center stage as it is right now.

This Old Testament story screams of prejudice, of bias. There is gut-wrenching pathos in what happened to the child Ishmael: *Hagar went and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water was all gone, she placed the child under one of the bushes. She then went away and sat down opposite him, about the distance of an arrow shot from a bow. For she said: I cannot bear to watch the dying child. As she sat there opposite him, the child loudly cried and wept.*

What mother or father among you cannot feel the distress of little Ishmael and the deep anguish of his mother Hagar. But a most beautiful part of the story then unfolds: *God heard the voice of the child, and the angel of God spoke to Hagar from the heavens: "Don't grieve so deeply, Hagar. Don't be afraid for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Get up, go and pick the child up and hold him in your arms, for God will make him a great nation". And then God enabled Hagar to see a well of water, and she went and filled the water bag and gave the child a drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up there in the wilderness and became an expert hunter with his bow and arrow.*

"Now God heard the voice of the child." That's it! Yes! YES! YES! GOD HEARD! God heard Ishmael, the Hebrew word that means *God hears*.

God hears and we have a glimpse of the God to whom all lives are precious. A God who *hears* the voice of one little Arab child dying of thirst out in the desert near Beersheba. Forget Abraham's faults, and forget Sarah with her cruel jealousy. Focus on the God in this story who *refuses* to accept that the life of one child, one foreign slave-woman's child, does not matter.

Jesus is the supreme revelation of this God. The God Jesus calls "Daddy" is one who cares for and claims every child, every single person and who will suffer to save and heal them. Jesus said, "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them can fall to the ground without your Father, (Daddy) knowing. But even the hairs of your head are numbered. So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows.*"

There is a troubling side to Jesus' teaching about the sparrows. This text acknowledges that sparrows do fall from the sky. It happens all the time. Jets suck them up in their engines. Predators prey upon their young. Sudden storms or droughts can deprive them of their food. God's love does not protect those tiny sparrows from life's tragedies. Sparrows do fall from the sky. That is not because they have been good sparrows or

bad--if sparrows can be good or bad. They fall because they are part of a lawful universe in which unfortunate tragedies do occur.

But here is the good news. The little sparrow never falls beyond God's watchful eye. The child of God who knows that he or she is under the watchful eye of God can, by God's grace, bear any burden, triumph over any tragedy, get on top of any circumstance because he knows that he is not alone. Jesus proclaimed that every person is precious. He went on preaching this message even as his own life was at risk; even when he knew that excruciating death on a cross was to be his horrible end. The suffering of the innocent remains a grievous puzzle to sensitive minds, but the Daddy of Jesus is not insensitive to even one little Arab or American or African American or Asian or Russian or Mexican or Spanish or whatever nationality or skin tone child's pain. The Daddy of Jesus hears every cry and cares about every human being, suffers for every human being, and plans for the ultimate joy of every human being who will accept the love that is offered.

The ancient story of Ishmael, sent away with his mother into the desert with only some bread and a water bag, is like a foreword to the Gospel of Jesus, who proclaims God's love for one lost sheep, one lost coin, one lost son: God heard the voice of the child. Every child matters.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, you tell me not to be afraid of what the future holds, not to worry about tomorrow, but you know how difficult I find it to heed your words. For I worry about so many things, my family, my friends, my circumstances; some worries are big worries, most worries tiny by comparison. I come before you this day with these big and tiny worries, and with confidence knowing I can lay them all at your feet.

I bring my big worries and the worries of the world about health and happiness and security for ourselves and for our loved ones. I bring big worries about the world I live in and its future existence as our society continues to fail to address so many ecological problems. I bring big worries about the way people in our world are treated as less than human, exploited, devalued and abused. Father God, I know that you are concerned with every aspect of my life, so I also bring the little things that concern me, the worries which keep me awake at night, the worries which only you know. (share these here)

Living God, reach out to all those for whom the future brings fears and uncertainties. Assure them that you are with them, even when that future seems dark and circumstances feel like they are spiraling out of control. Remind them that you are able to transform even the bleakest of situations, bring healing and wholeness. Lord I make my prayer in faith, for I know that your Spirit is at work in our world making all things new. Amen.

HYMN Why Should I Feel Discouraged? (#661 in the hymnal)

1. Why should I feel discouraged? Why should the shadows come? Why should my heart be lonely and long for heaven and home, when Jesus is my portion? My constant friend is he: his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me; his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, for his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.	2. "Let not your heart be troubled," his tender word I hear, and resting in his goodness, I lose my doubts and fears; though by the path he leadeth but one step I may see: his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me; his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, for his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.	3. Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise, when song gives place to sighing, when hope within me dies, I draw the closer to him; from care he sets me free: his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me; his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, for his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.
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BENEDICTION

Live purposefully, for God hears the voice of every child.

Live trustingly, for even the hairs of our heads are numbered.

Live bravely, for fear of failure is overshadowed by the love of Christ.

May the cool head of Christ Jesus guide you,
the immovable rock of God's love underpin you,
the warm fires of the Spirit embolden you,
today and always. Amen!

CLOSING YOUTUBE VIDEO <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-g4UWvcZn5U>