

The Religious Left: Not Peace, But A Sword?

My job, supposedly, is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Although originally used to describe the role of journalists, it's often been used to define the role of preachers. And there's no doubt in my mind that this gospel reading today is definitely afflictive. Yes, there's comfort in there, too. But seriously, who keeps listening after "Don't suppose that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace, but a sword"?

And frankly, the reading from Genesis isn't any better. Although I get it. It's a story from our sacred scripture – not historical fact, probably written around the 6th century. Genesis *is* a history book in the sense that it was written to create a history for a people living in exile. But its actual purpose is as a theological book, describing the relationship between a people and their God.

OK. But still, what are we to make of this story about Hagar and Ishmael? The backstory is back in chapter 16, where Hagar the Egyptian first appears. Sarah can't have kids, so she gives Hagar, her slave-girl to Abraham so that Hagar could produce a child in her place. Does this sound like an ancient version of *The Handmaid's Tale*? It should. If you're not familiar with the Margaret Atwood novel or now the TV series, it's about a dystopian future, in which women are forced to live as reproductive "handmaids" a la Hagar.

But let's be clear. Hagar was a slave. I disagree here with *The Inclusive Bible*, which translates the Hebrew word for 'slave' as 'attendant.' Hagar was not a willing employee to begin with. Then she was given to Abraham so she could be raped and forced to bear a child for him. She then undergoes abuse from Sarah – with the permission of Abraham – and runs away. God finds her and tells her to go back and submit to Sarah. But – don't worry, Hagar; you will have a son named Ishmael and all will be well. Is it any wonder that Phyllis Kreeft included Hagar's story in her groundbreaking feminist book *Texts of Terror*? It's a horrific story. The whole Abraham and Sarah narrative itself is a study in dysfunctional families.

The message of the whole Abraham/Sarah narrative, of course, is to tell us about the love and vision that God has for us, that despite our doubts and meddling and thinking we know best, God is able to take our stumbling efforts and make something good out of them. That's the "comfort the afflicted" part.

But I'm not so sure I want to get there so fast. I think we're too used to reading this "history" of ours through patriarchal, white, Judeo-Christian lenses. If we switch lenses to Hagar's point of view – an African slave woman – we should begin to squirm. And when we recognize that the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael is foundational to Islam, perhaps we should switch to these other lenses more often. Although it may cause us discomfort - and rightly so. Because reading Islam's version of the story takes us out of our position of

privilege. And no matter how liberal or progressive we think we are, we always have more to learn – about others, about ourselves, in so many different areas. Especially now in our own dystopian political reality. But even in places where you'd think we'd know better.

It's been interesting reading about some of the controversies around Pride this year. Lavern Cox complained recently: "As a black transgender woman, I have not always felt included in Pride, to be honest with you. The LGBTQ community has not always been the most welcoming to trans people and people of color." Also in recent news was the murder of a Muslim teenager by a Latino, which sparked discussions about Islamophobia among Latinos. One post on Twitter said: "Muslims from other backgrounds have begun to lash out at the Latino undocumented community to cope. This is not how we can move forward."

And that last sentence is exactly right. This is not how we can move forward. It seems that the more diverse we become, the more we have to learn how to hear stories from a different perspective and see life through other eyes. We'll never be truly welcoming if we don't. And that's a luxury we cannot afford.

There have been a lot of articles and blogs recently about the need for the Religious Left and Progressive Christianity to step up and, to get itself as well organized and effective as the Religious Right has been for so many years, to promote itself better as an alternative to fundamentalism. As protesters dressed as characters from *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrate against cuts to healthcare and reproductive rights for women, we can see that a dystopian future based on a literal reading of Genesis isn't so far off the mark. So, yes, it's time.

The big question is how do we do that? There are three things we have to be able to do. One: recognize that we'll never have a unified position like the Religious Right does. That's the beauty of who we are - and the challenge. Therefore, we have to do our own internal work of understanding the multitude of constituents under our umbrella. Not a simplistic and offensive "all lives matter, but "Black Lives Matter" and "Women's Rights Matter" and "Immigrants Are Welcome Here" and "Celebrate Pride," and all the other wonderfully diverse movements for rights and inclusion. Maybe it's actually comforting to be afflicted by scripture, knowing that our discomfort will prod us even further in the way Jesus calls us.

Speaking of which – back to the gospel. We read last week that Jesus sent out the original disciples with instructions to proclaim that the realm of heaven has come near by healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, and casting out demons. I suggested that we might translate that language into something more useful for today. For instance: care for those who are suffering; raise the spirits of those who feel like death, who wish they were dead, or whose dreams have died; take away the shame from those considered unclean or unworthy; cast out the demons of oppression and injustice.

Now today we find out that there may be a cost for doing any of that. "Don't suppose that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace, but a sword. I've come to turn a son

against his father, a daughter against her mother, in-law against in-law. One's enemies will be the members of one's own household.”

So the second thing we have to be able to do is recognize that sometimes proclaiming the realm of heaven – that is, life right here and right now – won't be popular. When I read Jesus words, I can't help thinking about my cousin's daughter, Lauren. After the election, her sister felt the need to get a license and carry a gun. Lauren, who has two toddlers, was very clear that she would not allow anyone carrying a gun into her home. Her sister took offence at this and the relationship has deteriorated from there, affecting everyone else in the family as well.

Last week, things escalated even more at a birthday party for my cousin, Lauren's mom. Afterward she told me that she's finally accepted that this rift may never be healed. “No peace but a sword.” Also, as she described to me the yelling and cursing she endured, she noted that her two brothers simply left the room. I'm not telling you this as a slam on them. After all, who likes conflict? The point, however, is that there will be times when we are called to stand up and speak up and leaving the room will not be an option. I'm proud of Lauren for standing up for her beliefs, even when it has meant discord within the family.

If we're going to speak from the Religious Left, we have to understand that there will be consequences. Lutheran Church of the Reformation in Washington DC, where we rested after the Women's March, put on their sign for Trinity (and Pride) Sunday: “Thank the Holy Trinity for God's Whole Diverse Creation – Happy and Blessed Pride!!! That got them onto the “Exposing the ELCA” website which says the congregation and the sign are shameful, tragic, and an apostasy (a renunciation of our Christian belief). No peace, but a sword. Get used to it.

The third thing we have to do is to speak our politics from our faith. In “Four Reasons Why the Resistance Needs the Christian Left,” Catherine Wallace argues: “The secular Left is too easily embarrassed by talk of spiritual yearnings and larger meanings in life. The Christian Left has a powerful, ancient language rooted in ancient teachings about compassion, social justice, public responsibility, and human moral equality.

“The Christian Left believes that compassion for others is the love of God flowing through us; human intelligence is the light of God shining through us. In our eyes, it is profoundly immoral—a direct offense against God and the image of God in other people—to scapegoat the vulnerable or to deny the actual consequences of legislation or executive orders. We have a powerful, accessible language in which to hold (our government) morally accountable. We can defend the moral heritage of the West in ways that cannot be easily dismissed as ‘partisan arguments’ defending ‘special interests.’”

So we've got to get over our shyness about speaking about spiritual matters, especially as they relate to our politics and our life in the public realm – which is the realm of heaven. There is no distinction. The realm of heaven has come near. It is among us. It is within you and me and all of us together.

We can be comforted in many ways by this. And we need to rely on that comfort as we go about the work of discipleship. Jesus said: "Don't let people intimidate you. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, and nothing is hidden that will not be made known. Don't be afraid of anything - you are more valuable than an entire flock of sparrows."

When you give yourself over to the ways of God, it might feel like you are losing your life – your autonomy, your independence. But in reality, you are gaining your life – a real, true, fulfilled life of being in unity with all of creation, of heaven and earth. And the work will flow from this divine, unified presence.

So don't be afraid. Don't be shy. The time is now.

Amen

Genesis 21:8-21

In this story, Hagar is the vulnerable one, the one who has lost everything, the refugee, the mother desperate to save her child. Ishmael, the child God delivers, is revered in Islam and according to legend buried alongside Hagar in Mecca. This passage reminds us that God cares for Muslims as well as us and that God's story of grace extends beyond our own tradition.

It is written . . .

The child grew, and on the day of weaning, Sarah and Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah noticed the child that Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. She demanded of Abraham, "Send Hagar and her child away! I will not have this child of my slave share in Isaac's inheritance."

Abraham was greatly distressed by this because of his son Ishmael. But God said to Abraham, "Don't be distressed about the child or about Hagar. Heed Sarah's demands, for it is through Isaac that descendants will bear your name. As for the child of Hagar the Egyptian, I will make a great nation of him as well, since he is also your offspring."

Early the next morning, Abraham took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar. Then, placing the child on her back, he sent her away. She wandered off into the desert of Beer-sheba. When the skin of water was empty, she set the child under a bush, and sat down opposite him about a bowshot away. She said to herself, "Do not let me see the child die!" And she began to wail and weep.

God heard the child crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven. "What is wrong, Hagar?" the angel asked. "Do not be afraid; for God has heard the child's cry. Get up, lift up the boy and hold his hand; for I will make of him a great nation." Then God opened

her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went to it and filled the skin with water, and gave the child a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the desert and became a fine archer. He made his home in the desert of Paran, and his mother found a wife for him in Egypt.

Matthew 10:24-39

Jesus' words express the conflicts that may occur when we follow God's way. The paths of denial and witness are placed before us, and we must ask, "Where do we deny Christ?" and "What is the nature of our witness?" Following Jesus means "letting our lives speak" in our families, employment, lifestyle, and politics, and this may lead to conflict, to a sword and not peace. Yet, the way of Jesus calls us to seek healing with civility in our relationships – to promote justice, to support the vulnerable, to sacrifice for the greater good, to encourage morality among our leaders and in our nation's policies. It is written . . .

"A student is not superior to the teacher, nor a servant above the master. The student should be glad simply to become like the teacher, the servant like the master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of the household!

"Don't let people intimidate you. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, and nothing is hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in darkness, speak in the light. What you hear in private, proclaim from the housetops.

"Do not fear those who can deprive the body of life but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.

"Are not the sparrows sold for pennies? Yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Abba's knowledge. As for you, every hair of your head has been counted. So don't be afraid of anything - you are worth more value than an entire flock of sparrows.

"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Abba in heaven. Whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before God in heaven.

"Don't suppose that I came to bring peace on earth. I came not to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to turn a son against his father, a daughter against her mother, in-law against in-law. One's enemies will be the members of one's own household.

"Those who love father or mother, daughter or son more than me are not worthy of me. Those who will not take up the cross – following in my footsteps - are not worthy of me.

"You who have found your life will lose it, and you who lose their life for my sake will find it."