

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
June 25, 2017
Matthew 10:24-39

What do a Jew, a Muslim and a Christian have in common?
Abraham.

Not a joke. But something you might want to know!

All Christians, Muslims and Jews trace their lineage back to Abraham. That's why you might hear it said, "Christianity is one of the 3 Abrahamic religions," - because we share the same ancestor.

In today's reading from Genesis we heard the troubling story of Sarah, who sends her maid Hagar, and Hagar's son out into the desert to die. This is the same maid whom Sarah had given to her husband Abraham in order to conceive his child so that he would have an heir because Sarah was barren. The child of that union was Ishmael. Muslims track their lineage back to him. Last week we heard God make good on his earlier promise to Abraham that his progeny would be as multiple as the stars or grains of sand. And sure enough, in her old age, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. As Christians, we track our lineage back through Isaac.

So God made good on both his promises, because in today's reading, God saved Hagar and her son, Ishmael, reassuring Abraham that "As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

Do you think that if more people knew that that Islam, Judaism and Christianity share the same ancestor, we might get along better? I sure hope so!

But people seem prone to fighting. Look what Jesus says in our reading from Matthew. People will take his message of love and freedom and truth, and it will tear apart families, friendships, communities and countries. He says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” His life and death showed his disciples, and us today, what can happen. People choose death over life; lives of deceit and the pursuit of power and wealth over lives of service. There is conflict in the world and Jesus’ presence will bring the conflict into the light. There is a longing in the world for the light of God, and there is a strong pull to the opposite direction – to the dark. This is the reality. And Jesus urges us to wake up, make choices that serve life and the light, and to be prepared.

In last week’s reading from an earlier passage from Matthew, we heard Jesus lament the lack of spiritual leadership among his people. Yes, there were synagogues and priests and scribes and teachers, but the people were lost – and they weren’t getting what they needed. They didn’t need pious leaders obsessed with religious ritual. They needed someone to give them hope, inspire faith and encourage them to share their gifts and wealth. Jesus knew what the people wanted so he met them in their place of need. And then he commissioned the disciples to do as he did: cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers. He emphasized how much in need the

people were and what an important contribution the disciples had to make. He likened the people to sheep without a shepherd and he said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few." What is needed in the world, are leaders and people who care..... not pomp, piety and privilege.

Two years ago when Jim walked the Camino, the 1100 year old, 800 k. pilgrimage in Spain, he came across farms with hundreds and hundreds of sheep. He watched in amazement as a farmer would call out and all those sheep break into a run to see how close they could get to the farmer. They knew their shepherd's voice and were desperate to be close. So the image of a shepherd is a fitting one. A shepherd is one who cares for those in his or her care. A shepherd has the interests of those entrusted to him at heart. The sheep know that. And stay close.

So in this week's reading from Matthew, Jesus moves from the call to lead and love, to the more stark realities of being a disciple.

He starts by pointing out that while the disciple not above the master, the disciple is involved in his master's business. And as such, he will likely experience similar things. And as the disciples will soon discover, this includes persecution, false accusations, suffering and maybe even death. Jesus is likely trying to prepare them for the realities of becoming a follower of his.

So in today's reading, Jesus is telling his followers to open their eyes to the realities of the world where people use power over others to advance themselves, to take money and resources for themselves,

and as such, will be threatened by those who speak truth to power and who bring the message of freedom and justice / the gospel message. Jesus is forecasting conflict.

But then he goes on to remind them of the power of the gospel. That they mustn't be afraid. Three times in the reading he says, "Do not fear," or, "Do not be afraid." He's not fooling them into believing that life will be easy; no rather, he is reassuring them that even when the going gets tough, they have something/someONE who will see them through. He says if anyone "acknowledges him before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven." In other words, when we stand firm in our faith, those who use power over us, even to the point of killing us, will not be able to destroy our souls. And as we hear elsewhere in the gospel, nothing can separate us from God. And from today: "Not one will fall to the ground apart from the your Father." God knows and holds us each personally. No one is beyond his knowledge for God created us and so "even the hairs of your head are counted."

This kind of kind of love does not make us immune to suffering. It *does* mean we are not alone when we suffer. What is immune, Jesus says, is our souls when we live by the gospel truth and power.

Standing firm and speaking truth to power is not easy. We just have to think of people like Martin Luther King. Doing what's right can be very challenging.

Jesus confirms this. As the Prince of Peace, Jesus came to bring the good news that we are loved and created for freedom. And this

precise message has been twisted to bring about suffering and cruelty in the name of Jesus. So, Jesus prepares us. His message will split families, it will turn child against parent; friend against friend.

People don't like this passage, but it's true. We all know families and communities that have been split apart by people's choices and determination to follow the gospel life.

We only have to think of St. Francis who as a young man followed the calling in his heart and left his life of privilege to restore the church and help the poor. His father was outraged that he could turn down the comforts and opportunities bound up in the life of the well-to-do. Francis gave up his life of privilege to find a new and very different life following Jesus. We don't know what fears he had to overcome, but we know that once he made the commitment, he was supported in faith.

Do not fear. It's easy to say. But it's exactly our places of fear that show us where we need to grow in faith. So instead of pushing fear away, we can use fear to guide us. We can practice trust in the small challenges of daily life. We can open our eyes to the multitude of ways God is present to us in the moments of our days. Instead of fighting back when we are attacked by others, it serves us to turn to God. Say the name "Jesus." Acknowledge Jesus and Jesus will acknowledge you before God.

Finding our life in Jesus takes courage, but we are also led by grace. And for that we can be truly thankful.

Amen.

