

"CONFUSED BUT NOT FORGOTTEN"

A Sermon By

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"CONFUSED, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN"

INTRODUCTION

Ten year old, Richard, was excited about a Cub Scout camp-out that called for the weekend presence of his father. "Dad...do you think we can go?" Richard, Sr. was thinking about all of the times his young son had asked "Dad...are you working tonight?" And far too often he had offered up to his son some rather lame excuse instead of going out and pitching a ball or shooting baskets or just sitting and talking. He had promised himself that the next time he would say "yes" to whatever it was that his son was asking him to do. "You'll bet we'll go!" was his answer to young Richard. "Oh, boy" the son shouted, throwing his arms around his dad's neck. Richard, Sr. wasn't quite as enthusiastic for he remembered sleeping out in his own backyard as a boy and how afraid he was. Camping was not his thing.

Finally, the long awaited weekend arrived and they gathered at the Scout Camp. Fifteen cub scouts, one "gung-ho" leader and a motley group of fathers who wondered what in the world they were doing there. The first afternoon was spent trying to figure out how to set up the borrowed tents. Richard, Sr. said,

"I taught my young son everything I knew about camping out in the first twenty minutes or so....and then we spent the rest of the time learning together...and we had a wonderful time..."

Sunday afternoon came and it was time to "break camp", get into the cars and head back home. Richard, Sr. reflecting on the weekend weeks later said,

"I felt a deep sense of peace and satisfaction and I heard the gentle whisper of God's voice while there. I uttered a prayer of my own and softly said, 'Thank you, God...this will make a really nice memory...' And it did.

ABRAHAM WAS A FATHER, TOO

Abraham, whom we thought about last Sunday, was also a father. It's hard to imagine what it must have been like for Abraham to finally have a son by his wife, Sarah. Something of a miracle. Remember, he was "up there" in years... 'way up!

Abraham named his son, Isaac. And as was the custom of his day, when Isaac was about three years old he was "weaned" (that's what the Bible says) and a celebration took place. But now in the midst of this wonderful celebration something else took place and it was something rather unsettling. Sarah saw her son, Isaac, playing with Ishmael. Ishmael was also Abraham's son, but his mother was the slave woman, Hagar. I guess you could say that Abraham had taken God's promise seriously that he would "father" a great nation. When God was slow to act, Abraham decided to take matters into his own hands and have a son by this slave woman, Hagar.

Hagar and Sarah didn't get along. There was resentment and bitterness on Sarah's part. Jealousy and anger touched her soul as she saw the boys playing together. She demanded that Abraham get rid of this woman and her son. You would have thought that Sarah would have been grateful for this son in her old age, but instead she was so eaten up with jealousy that she simply wanted Hagar and Ishmael out of her life - now and forever! What was Abraham to do?

GOD'S LOVE HELPS US OVERCOME

There are times when life is unfair, but because of God's love, we are able to overcome.

Apparently there was this bitter rivalry between Sarah and Hagar and it seems to me that Abraham was either unable or unwilling to intervene to help solve the problem. All of these negative feelings erupted in Sarah as she saw her son, Isaac, playing with Ishmael. Ishmael was not being mean to Isaac or in any way being abusive to him; they were simply playing together - half brothers - in the midst of a celebration. Sarah called out 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...."

Sarah wanted action and wanted it now. And how sad. Sad - for Sarah and Hagar, and especially for Ishmael. He would be cut off from his father. He would no longer know his father's love. Unfortunately, Ishmael's problem is not rare.

There are people who have lived their entire lives without feeling the special love between a father and a child. And granted, some fathers have not been positive role models. But, to me, the liberating "good news" of the Gospel of Christ is that with the love of God we are able to transcend those negative life experiences some of us have had along the way. I believe that with the love of God we can be "whole" persons again.

An illustration. Remember Ken Burns' series on the Civil War two or three years ago on public TV. One scene has lingered in my mind....it had to do with the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913. A group of old Confederate and Union veterans returned to Gettysburg to commemorate the battle. Old films showed the men talking over the old times...swapping stories and even eating together. Then there was a re-enactment of Pickett's Charge. The old Union soldiers took their places as they had fifty years earlier among the rocks on Seminary Ridge. The old Confederate soldiers took their places on the farm-land below. After a while the Confederates started to move forward across the broad, flat field where just fifty years before many men had died. An eyewitness said this,

"We could not see rifles and bayonets, but canes and crutches" as they made their slow advance toward the ridge with the more able-bodied ones helping the disabled ones.

As the Confederate troops got near the Union line, they broke into one long, defiant yell. Then something quite remarkable happened. Unable to restrain themselves any longer the Yankees burst from behind the stone wall and flung themselves upon their former enemies. Only this time, fifty years later, they did not battle with them, but instead threw their arms around them. Some in blue, some in gray...the old men embraced one another and wept.

What a difference fifty years made. In that moment, they understood that they were created not to do battle with one another but to love one another. For a few brief moments these veterans lived out that truth.

Ishmael represented a threat to Sarah and to what she perceived as her son's right. Abraham loved Ishmael and was greatly distressed and unsure of what to do. Should he follow through with his wife's demand or should he listen to his own heart?

GOD SPOKE TO ABRAHAM

It was during this time of despair that God once again spoke to Abraham. God told Abraham,

"Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman. I will make a nation of him also because he is your son, your offspring...." (Genesis 21: 13)

And so we find Abraham once again trusting God knowing that somehow Ishmael would be cared for and in one of the saddest scenes to me in all the Bible, we see Abraham giving in to Sarah and casting out Hagar and Ishmael. A sad scene... a woman and her son cast out into the desert with only a skin filled with water and a little bit of bread. How long did Abraham think the water would last and how long did he think the bits of bread would nourish them? The hot desert was no place for Hagar and Ishmael to be without adequate provision.

And then when those scanty provisions ran out Hagar could not stand to see her son suffer and so she did the best that any mother could do in such a circumstance. She found some shade in the desert and left her son there. She cried out for any and all to hear, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." She sat down in the desert and wept. It just wasn't fair...it just wasn't right. She felt she deserved better!

God heard the cry of Hagar for help. An angel called to Hagar, "What troubles you, Hagar?" The angel sought to comfort her, saying:

"Do not be afraid. Lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

And Hagar did as the angel instructed her.

As she dried her tears, God showed her a well where she and her son could draw water. They would not die in the desert. God would be with them. Ishmael would grow and become "an expert with the bow". And his mother would find a suitable wife for him. Something in that line that bothers me...

"He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt". (Genesis 21: 21)

God would fulfill His promises. They were not alone. A loving Father was looking after them. Curious, isn't it, both Muslims and Jews date back and go back to Abraham as the father of their people. But the "Good News" for us today is that we all have a loving Father. Let's move on. An illustration to help open up the truth of all of this.

A LOVING FATHER

A lady by the name of Judy Harkness was homeless. She sat in her car with six children, trying to sleep. The only home they had was their car. They had no bathroom, no kitchen to cook a hot meal. No living room in which to spread out and no couch to stretch out on to watch TV. Meals? They came mostly from garbage cans in the back of markets. They waited in soup lines for hours for a hot meal. Their only income came from collecting cans and bottles and returning them for the nickel deposit.

Judy felt all alone and confused. Her family refused to let them stay with them. Friends had a way of disappearing overnight. A difficult time for her.

When she felt herself slipping and giving way to hate, Judy would grab her Bible and read. She even talked to God as if God were sitting there right next to her. She says that once she heard God speaking words of comfort to her,

"I will never leave you nor forsake you"....Suddenly she felt the love of God in a real and very deep way in her life.

She felt God really did love her and care. She saw Christ on the cross and felt His arms reaching down to her and around her as she cried and called on His name for help. Judy began attending Church and felt the love of God coming to her through other people. Her life slowly changed for the better. Not all at once, but slowly and gradually she escaped the dark life of poverty, she claims, "Because people loved me as God loves us all!"

I believe that in those moments of despair God does hear our cry for help. And what a difference it makes when we realize how much God loves us and that we are never left alone. This story of Judy Harkness was in our United Methodist Reporter of last January. I Escaped Homlessness Because of God's Love.

CLOSING STORY AND FINAL WORDS

memory from his childhood years.

James W. Moore in an article titled, Is There Life After Stress, recalls a special

He thinks it happened when he was five years old...a day with his grandmother who lived nearby. A very violent thunder storm hit them around supper time. "Oh, Jim...how are we ever going to get you back home in this terrible thunderstorm?" The answer came a few moments later when his father appeared at the front door. He had come to get five year old Jim. The wind was blowing and the rain was pelting down and lightning was flashing all around. Thunder was rumbling. A bad storm. The storm showed no sign of letting up. It was a nasty night and the storm showed no sign of letting up at all. It was getting worse.

Jim's father was wearing a big blue weather coat and as they prepared to head home, he said, "Son...come on under here." He covered his young son with his coat and the two of them went out into the storm together. Even though it was raining and thundering and lightning, Jim recalls he was not at all frightened. He knew that his father could see where they were going and so he just held on - tightly - and trusted him. Soon the coat opened and they were home!

When you come right down to it, that's what being a father is all about. And the loving father in this story of Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, is really not Abraham. Confused, but not forgotten. Abraham doesn't come across to me here as a great model of a father or husband. No, for me, the loving father in this Old Testament Genesis story is God.

Let me sum it all up here with this word. There may be times when earthly fathers disappoint us, just as Abraham may have disappointed Ishmael. Our Heavenly Father never disappoints us. On this special Sunday in June some of us can celebrate fathers who loved us and nurtured us and who were there for us. They may no longer be with us in this life. Others of us, perhaps, had fathers who were for the most part absent. But all of us have the same Heavenly Father who nurtured and cared for Ishmael. He never forsakes us. He is there for us always! This is the "take home" word for today.

PRAYER

On this Father's Day, dear God, make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence. We hold in fond remembrance "our fathers", living and dead...who were there for us in so many moments of life. We have been blessed, richly blessed by their love and support. We thank you, too, that we each have a "heavenly Father", as well...one who loves us and cares for us no matter what. Let our faith in You, dear Father be strong and sturdy, for we know that You are always there for us. In the spirit and name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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