

**“Enough to Go Around”**

**Genesis 21:8-21**

**July 9, 2017**

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We've been talking the last few weeks about Abraham, and how a majority of the population of the world counts Abraham as the father of their faith. And Abraham is the only person in all of the Bible who is called “the friend of God.” What an amazing man he must have been! What a man of great character, of strength, of principle, of compassion, a unique man in all of history. Right? Well . . . maybe not. If we look closer at the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Abe doesn't always come off so good. Remember when God first called Abraham to move from Haran to Canaan and promised to give this land to his descendents? Abraham and Sarah took with them their nephew Lot. And when they got to Canaan, Lot talked Abraham out of all the good land around the river and stuck Abraham with all the dry hills and desert. Then when they have to travel to Egypt when there is a famine in the land, Abraham loses his trust in God and tells Sarah to lie and say she is his sister and not his wife lest Pharaoh try to kill him and take his beautiful wife. So he lets Sarah be added to Pharaoh's harem until God started to send plagues on Pharaoh's house because he had taken a woman who was married to another. After they leave Egypt they travel back to Canaan, but the promised children have not yet arrived, Sarah has yet to get pregnant and so again they lose their trust in God. Sarah has a slave named Hagar and has Abraham get her pregnant and she gives birth to a son, Ishmael. Of course God had always intended on delivering on his promise to Sarah and she also gets pregnant and gives birth to another son, Isaac. Now Abraham has the great blessing of two sons, right? Not right, because the two sons have different mothers and Sarah begins to think about what might happen when Abraham dies. Who will be his heir? Who will get all the flocks and herds and the gold that

they picked up when they were in Egypt? She's his wife, it should be her son, Isaac, she thinks. But Ishmael is the first born even though he is the child of a slave woman. She sees this as a zero sum game, if one inherits, the other gets nothing. Just so there is no confusion, she decides to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael and she tells Abraham to send them away. And here's where Abraham's character shines through, right? He tells Sarah that she should have some compassion, that he's not going to send these two out into the desert to die. He tells her this isn't a zero sum game, that there is enough to go around for both his sons, that his love is not limited to just one. Except he doesn't say that. Even though this is a patriarchal society and in those days it was not all that uncommon for a man to have children by multiple women, even more than one wife—just wait until we get to the story of Jacob—it seems that the strong one in the family was not Abraham, but Sarah. And so Abraham gives in and sends Hagar and Ishmael away, knowing that they might die out in the wilderness. Weak, self-serving, easily pushed around, is this the father of Jews and Christians and Muslims? Yes it is. Abraham and Sarah, typical human beings, not too much different from us, with their weaknesses and problems. But even so, they are the couple that God decides to work through, to pass his blessing on to the world, to teach about the one, invisible God who is creator of all.

But ultimately this is not a story about Abraham and Sarah, and the problems they may have had. And it's not just a story about Hagar and Ishmael and how God rescued them out of the wilderness. It's a story that tells us something about God. Maybe this was not what God had planned, Ishmael is the child of the lack of faith of Abraham and Sarah. And since he's arrived his very existence has caused problems in the tents of the family that God has chosen. So what does God do? Does he ignore Ishmael and prefer Isaac? Does he bless only Isaac to the exclusion of Ishmael? Or does he expand the blessing? He blesses Ishmael as well. He doesn't

leave him out of the covenant, but rather creates a new covenant with Ishmael, promising to make a great nation out of him as well.

Enough to go around. Is there enough to go around? Is this a zero sum game where some are blessed and others not and we'd better figure out how to be on God's good side? Siobhan Garrigan, the Irish liturgical theologian at Trinity College in Dublin was traveling around Ireland doing research for her book "The Real Peace Process," about how faith and churches contribute to or hinder peace. Arriving at a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, Siobhan was pleased to be greeted at the door by two women, church members, who seemed to invite her into conversation. Siobhan realized that these women were greeters, like we have at the door to the church, whose job it was welcome those who were arriving. Their job also was to talk to any visitors, ask their names as they were greeted. She noticed that they were careful to ask everyone's first name. Then Siobhan figured out what was happening. Hearing the first names of first time visitors, the greeters would draw conclusions about the cultural and religious identity of each. Those with Protestant names were welcomed warmly and shown their seats. Those with apparently Catholic names, the Marias and the Catherines and the Patricks, were told that they were surely in the wrong church and were sent on their way.<sup>1</sup> It's important for us to realize that this was not an experience in the middle of the 1970s or 80s in the middle of the Troubles, but was the practice in this current Presbyterian church.

Good thing we're nothing like that, right? There's no one who, if they showed up at our doors on Sunday morning wouldn't be welcome, right? We would greet anyone at the door and welcome them. But would our body language, our tone of voice, whether we went out of our way to ask their name or show them a seat, show true welcome no matter what? Would someone of a

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1 Garrigan, Siobhan. *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the End of Sectarianism*. London, 2010.

different race feel welcome here? What about someone who is not dressed well, who is obviously poor? What about someone who is uneducated, who speaks poorly? What about someone who smells badly? What about someone who speaks broken or no English? What about someone who has physical limitations? Where would someone in a wheelchair find space in our worship? What about someone who is deaf or blind? How would they worship here? What if someone came in wearing a hijab or a taqiyah? A taqiyah is the little rounded skull cap often worn by Muslim men during prayer. What would we think, what would we say? Would they be welcome to pray with us? What about the person who sits right behind you or right in front of you in church, but with whom you've never really gotten along? Are you worshipping together, or separately in the same place? Or have you ever been the one who feels abandoned, alone in a strange place, out in the wilderness wondering if God hears you, if God really cares?

When Abraham and Sarah send Hagar out into the wilderness with her son, Ishmael, they travel until they run out of water and begin to despair for their lives. Hagar can't bear to watch her son die and so she leaves him crying under a bush and goes off by herself. That's when an angel of the Lord speaks to her and says a remarkable thing. He tells her that God has heard the boy. The name Ishmael means "God hears." And God promises that he will live, he will prosper and become a great nation. Tradition of course, says that while Isaac is the father of the Jews, Ishmael is the father of Arab nations. Muslims trace their faith back to the promise made here to Ishmael. God hears. God hears not just the prayers of Christians or Jews, God hears the prayers of Muslims, of Buddhists, of Hindus, of Sikhs, and of all others. Abraham and Sarah were wrong. They were afraid for Isaac's inheritance, afraid there wasn't enough to go around. But there was, there is. Somehow they were afraid that there wasn't enough of God's blessings to go around, maybe even that there wasn't enough of God to go around. But there is.

God is a God of embrace, a God of mercy, a God of healing and wholeness and reconciliation. But when we make a mistake and exclude and push out those that are different, even with the best of intentions, God is still there. Our own failings do not mean that God is less than faithful, just that we still have places to grow. But we need to learn that life is not a “zero-sum” game. There is enough of God and his blessings to go around. Just because we believe God blesses us, doesn't mean he can't bless others.

We took an offering this morning that we call “2 Cents a Meal.” We do that because we believe that some people don't have enough food or water or shelter. That doesn't mean there isn't enough, it just means that we need to be reminded that as God's people we are to try to act in God's image, as we believe God would act—spreading the blessings around. Because we soon discover that as we share our blessings, we are blessed. There's enough to go around. And God hears, he hears the cries of those who feel abandoned, who are alone, who are hurting, who are hungry and thirsty. And he uses us to answer those cries.