

Cast Out of the Family
Genesis 21:8-21
Matthew 10:34-39

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When Monica came out as transgender, her wife—screaming, sobbing—threw Monica’s clothes out the window, all over the lawn. The wife, understandably, was not happy to discover that her husband, who had served in the military and fathered her two children, had now decided—or come to realize—that he was she. Monica’s two children had a rough time dealing with this change as well. What? Their father was now their... what? other mother? This was confusing and set them up for ridicule among their peers. And yet for Monica, this was a truth that she could no longer deny. She needed to stop being husband and father and to start being Monica, partner and parent and presenting herself to the world as the woman she had long felt herself to be.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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, . . . and a trans-gender woman against her wife . . . ; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

That’s where Jesus brings the sword: into one’s own household. We can see how the truth for Monica’s wife and kids is in direct conflict with the truth for Monica. In that family, there was not room for both truths.

In these instances, families often have to make wrenching choices. Do they stick with their child or spouse, and reject their faith, which says all LGBT people are going to hell? Or reject their social and political circle, which helps define who they are? Some families choose one way; some choose another. How many LGBT people have come out to their

families and experienced rejection of their truth, perhaps been kicked out of the family? Maybe, like Monica, they found their clothes all over the lawn, their things sitting at the curb. How many people have heard, “You are no son of mine,” “You are no daughter of mine,” “You are no spouse of mine,” “You are dead to this family”? The sword cuts the family in two.

The issue may not be sexuality or gender identity. Perhaps it’s political or religious beliefs, or a misunderstanding or slight that has festered until it becomes an infection that touches the entire household. Perhaps it is an affair or an addiction that causes the family bonds to break. There are many ways for families to become dysfunctional or to split apart. We probably all have such stories to tell: siblings who didn’t speak for years, parents who disowned a child, children who walked away from their families. We all need to live our truth, and sometimes our families cannot hold that truth, or even actively work against it.

So perhaps it is not just the lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered in our midst who can identify with Hagar and Ishmael being cast out of the family to die in the desert. And this is indeed one heck of a dysfunctional family. Abraham and Sarah are apparently half-siblings who marry—hey, this is well before all the rules in Leviticus. They leave their family behind in a place called Ur and travel west and south to create a home. During a famine, they move to Egypt for a time, where there is food. Abraham tells Sarah that they will travel as brother and sister so that no one who falls for Sarah will try to kill husband Abraham to get him out of the way. This doesn’t seem to be an entirely well thought out strategy, because sure enough, Pharaoh falls for Sarah and takes her into his household to be a wife. But he finds out that Sarah and Abraham are actually married, and he fears that the gods will be after him for taking another man’s wife, so he sends them on their way with abundant goods. Apparently their booty includes Hagar, the Egyptian slave. She is thus a reminder of a pretty rocky time.

When Sarah does not produce children, as all good wives are supposed to do, she gives her slave Hagar to Abraham to have children in her stead. There is some record in laws of that region around that time about such things happening—a slave being given to the husband to produce children when the wife cannot.

But what happens next could perhaps have been foreseen. Hagar gets pregnant, and Sarah becomes jealous. Sarah's in a lose-lose situation: unable to produce her own offspring, but infuriated when anyone else does so, even though she herself created that arrangement. She has been displaced as Abraham's wife.

And when Sarah, miracle of miracles, finally does have her own son, Isaac, she can't stand seeing the two boys play together. That's it: Hagar and Ishmael, you are out of here! You are no longer any family of mine; go off and die in the desert. The family is broken. The sword has cut it in two.

Have you ever hit bottom and not known how to find a way forward? The family kicks you out, the money evaporates, the job disappears. Have you ever felt yourself completely alone, abandoned, and without resources? This is Hagar and Ishmael out in the wilderness. The family is gone; the bread is gone; the water is gone. They are lying down to die, wailing to God in their despair.

It turns out that this is a good moment to reach out to God. God hears wails of despair. If there's one thing we know about God, it is that God looks out for widows and orphans. And I love the tone of voice of God's angel, "Hey, what's up Hagar? Don't be afraid; God is going to make it all work out." There's that standard "don't be afraid" that comes with every divine-human encounter. But this time it means, "Don't be afraid; you do have a future."

And the future is to become the founding line of the Muslim branch of the Abrahamic faith traditions. Pretty good! But first Hagar needs water.

God opens her eyes to the presence of a well. It must have been there the whole time, right? But she wasn't ready to see until that moment.

We never hear of Hagar or Ishmael talking to Abraham or Sarah again. And after Abraham tries to kill his other son, Isaac, as an offering to God, we never hear Sarah or Isaac talk to Abraham again. This is truly a dysfunctional, shattered family. Maybe it is comforting to know that our own dysfunctional families have precedent going back clear to the beginning—and that God can work with that, can create a way out of no way, a life-giving path forward through the wilderness.

It is comforting to know that God is present to us even in our moments of greatest despair and isolation, when all hope seems lost, when family ties are sundered. God is still speaking, even in the driest desert. There is living water in the wilderness. There is a new direction possible if we can open our eyes and hearts to see.

How many LGBT people have been pushed out of their families of origin and gone on to create new family, new relationships, new support systems? They do not stay alone in the desert. Their true life beckons, and with it, community that loves them just as they are.

In the United Church of Christ, we are called to be our best and truest and most loving selves. We recognize that that looks different for each person. As an Open & Affirming congregation, we state explicitly that we welcome lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered; we welcome people with physical challenges and disabilities; we welcome people with different levels of education and income. We try to be as welcoming as possible to all, recognizing that we, too, carry our own biases and dysfunctions.

Today, people all over are celebrating the LGBT people in our midst. Some of our members will march in the Pride Parade this afternoon, even in wilting heat, to convey the message that we celebrate and affirm diversity of God's children.

There are other ways in which people find themselves in the desert. In July we will be helping families that have hit bottom. Mary's Place provides a safety net to help families who are without housing get back on their feet. We will be a part of that effort by providing food and shelter for one week. Mary's Place provides job training, ESL classes, transportation to and from school, and more for these families. This is God providing water in the wilderness and a way out of no way.

Today the month of Ramadan draws to a close for our Muslim brothers and sisters who, as I mentioned, trace their faith tradition back to Abraham through his son Ishmael, the one cast out of the family. Some Christians feel that Muslims are the enemy, and vice versa. Others, and I hope we count ourselves among them, know that we are all God's beloved children. The one time we hear of Ishmael again is when Abraham dies. Abraham, patriarch of this crazy, split, dysfunctional family, is dead, and his two eldest sons, Isaac and Ishmael, come together to bury him (Gen. 25:9). I find it extraordinary that this moment is even mentioned in the Bible—these two brothers coming together after all this time to bury their father. It suggests to me that there can be opportunities to come together again, even if just to bury the dead, and in those moments to recognize our common bonds as family, however dysfunctional.

Today we also recognize the 60th anniversary of the founding of the United Church of Christ denomination. Sixty years ago, the Congregational Christian denomination and the Evangelical and Reformed denomination threw their lot in together and became the United Church of Christ. A new family, so to speak. And the motto of this new family comes from the gospel of John: "That they may all be one." We believe that God is still speaking, still pointing out the living water in the wilderness, still calling us to do a new thing, still calling us to be our best and truest selves in all the colors of the rainbow.

This week I head to Baltimore for the UCC's General Synod, where we will debate and vote on as many as 21 resolutions, take workshops, worship together multiple times, and continue to listen for how that still-speaking God calls us to be Church in the 21st century. I am looking forward to this gathering, and I will report back to you by posting photos and stories to our church's Facebook page, by preaching on topics covered at Synod, and by inviting people to gather sometime this summer to hear about the resolutions that were passed. It is good to know what is going on in the bigger picture of our UCC family and to consider how we are a part of that.

I began this sermon with the story of Monica at a point in her life where she was cast out of the family to go live in the desert. I met her sometime later when we were both in seminary, and we had many classes together. Her family had moved on with their lives, just as she had moved on with hers, and I think she was trying to rebuild new relationships with her kids.

I want to close with another story of people I met in seminary, because they show another possible ending to a similar situation.

When Margaret read the biography of a transgender man, she sat in her backyard sobbing uncontrollably. She recognized that this story described the journey to which she was called as well, that she felt herself to be a man stuck in a woman's body. Her lesbian partner Kathleen came home from work and found her in this distraught state. Margaret was terrified that Kathleen would leave her. Kathleen said, "Honey, I fell in love with you, not with your gender. We will figure this out." And with that affirmation, Margaret began the transition to Mark. When people ask Mark and Kathleen whether that means they are now technically a heterosexual couple, they laugh and say, "You know, we gave up on those labels. We don't care anymore about categories. We just are who we are, and we love each other."

That's how God loves us. We are who we are, regardless of categories, and God loves us just that way. God points us to the living water and says, "Come, drink. And then I have a new path for you to check out."

May that always be true. Amen.