Sunday, June 23, 2002
TROUBLE IN MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY
Genesis 21:8-21

I was reading an article the other day in one of the professional journals which I regularly receive. The theme of this short essay was marriage. One of the opening sentences said, "The institution of marriage is in crisis." I've been reading a variety of commentators recently who make the same assertion. Many of them go on to say, "Not only is the institution of marriage in crisis, but the family as we know it is also in trouble."

You may be surprised to hear me say today that I don't agree with these statements. Here's the way I see it: marriage has always had its difficulties, and so has the family. There was never a "golden age" in the past when marriage and the family were not in trouble or in crisis. The word "crisis" means "turning point" or "crucial moment." Marriage and the family are not in any worse shape today than ever before. In fact, a strong argument can be made that in many parts of the world, including the United States, marriage and the family are in better shape overall.

I also frequently hear commentators say, "We need to return to the biblical view of marriage and the family." Then I want to ask, "Which biblical view?" Because there are many. And some of them are views we can rejoice are a thing of the past.

For example, in the Old Testament of the Bible, one common practice followed by leading patriarchs, such as Abraham, was "polygyny," the taking of multiple wives and concubines. The story read earlier from the book of Genesis describes some of the problems of this tradition. I'll return to that story later.

Another biblical understanding of marriage that you would not want to imitate is that of the wife being considered the property of the husband. Marriage, according to this biblical view, was considered a transaction between the groom and the father of the bride. A woman was taken from the household of her father into the household of her husband; and money, goods, or labor could flow in the other direction, from the husband to the father-in-law. In this view of marriage, the woman was simply moved from the domain of one patriarch to another. The daughter, who had been the property of her father, now became the property of her husband. That's why, in the 10th commandment in Exodus, wives are listed alongside slaves, oxen, donkeys, and other property as things belonging to one man that another man should not covet. I could give you more examples of marriages which, today, we would consider unjust and cruel.

In the early history of the United States and in many other countries as well, before women had the right to vote, and even thereafter, many of the traditions of patriarchy survived. Under common law, a woman was absorbed into her husband's legal and economic persona upon marrying, and her husband gained the civic presence she lost.

In the 1850s, it was not surprising for an essayist to write about marriage in the United States: "The husband confers identity and power. He represents the wife in the political and civil order." So many generations of politicians regarded this model of marriage as a foundation of the American way of life that its influence extended into the mid-20th century. As recently as 1996, congressional debate on the Defense of Marriage Act reiterated long-held views of traditional marriage as a necessary pillar of the nation. That's why I'm always suspicious today

when I hear politicians and even church leaders talk about restoring “traditional family values.” I want to know what kind of tradition the “family values” they wish to restore come from.

There are even churches in the Christian tradition today, and some other religions, which still teach that women are to be in submission to their husbands as if they were property and not human beings. In some of these churches, women cannot vote or hold leadership positions.

Keeping this in mind, let’s return to the story from the Bible about Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. In this story, we have an early example of women being considered property, an example of surrogate parenting, and the pathos of its biological success and its spiritual failure.

The relationship between Sarah, Abraham’s wife, and Hagar, the Egyptian slave, is instructive. It is a story that revolves around the relationship between two women who are both dependent on one man, the head of the household. But oddly, the fact that each of them lacks power does not unite them. Instead, it pits them against each other, turning them into rivals and finally separating their sons — brother from brother.

According to the story, Sarah could not have children. In biblical times, for a woman, this was a fate worse than death. She had failed to provide Abraham with an heir. Somehow, she was determined to remedy the situation. She offered her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, to Abraham, saying, “I shall obtain children by her.” It sounds good. All surrogate parenting arrangements sound good at first. Theoretically, there is no logical reason why one woman cannot bear a child for another, hand it over, and get on with her life. But you know better. It gets sticky, real sticky.

Consider Sarah’s pain. She makes her husband an offer that must have gone against her heart and soul. Here is the grief of a woman who is growing old and who has been raised in a tradition where she was taught that her primary purpose was to produce children. Having “failed” in this, how can she even consider herself a full woman in Abraham’s eyes? In those days, it was the tradition that if a wife gave her husband a slave girl to be a surrogate, it could forestall the husband’s taking of another wife. So maybe Sarah was thinking that before she would be replaced as a wife for her failure to bear children, she could offer this solution and thereby hope to retain her place as the only wife.

Consider also Hagar’s pain. No one asked her permission in this scheme. No one obtained her consent. She was a slave and had to do what was commanded. Women slaves have been used like this throughout history.

The plan worked. Hagar became pregnant, and her supposedly neutral body now assumed a personality. Having succeeded where Sarah failed, this slave woman finally had some power of her own. She had what Sarah lacked: fertility. So the Bible story tells us, “She looked with contempt on her mistress.” The tables are turned, and it is hard for Hagar not to rub it in.

In retaliation, Sarah “dealt harshly with Hagar.” How do you make life worse for someone who is already a slave? Sarah probably ignored her pregnancy and insisted that she continue doing all her work. Hagar, in desperation, finally ran away. She almost starves to death but then returns to Sarah and Abraham. She is given her job back and gives birth to her son, Ishmael.

But the story is far from over. Now Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son named Isaac. This was so far beyond her wildest expectations that, for a while, she was as happy as she had ever been. But then one day, she found Isaac and Ishmael playing together, and once

again trouble erupted. She pleaded with Abraham to throw out the slave woman and her son, Ishmael. She didn't want her son Isaac to compete with Ishmael as Abraham's heir.

Hagar and Ishmael are told to leave, and they do. When mother and child are about to die from thirst and starvation, the Bible story says that God intervened, and they are saved. God also promised Hagar that her son would grow up to be the father of a great nation, just like his half-brother Isaac back home. And so it happened. Tradition tells us that the Arabs trace their family tree back to Ishmael, and the Jews trace theirs to Isaac, both of whom are sons of Abraham.

Now comes the most difficult question. What has all this to do with us today, with you and me? On the surface, of course, it's a story about sibling rivalry between half-brothers. It's a story about trouble in the family. It's also a story about what happens when people feel trapped by their lack of options and grow desperate. It also shows that just because one has known oppression, as Sarah did by being the property of her husband, there is no guarantee that he or she will spare others when they have the power.

As for Sarah and Hagar, it is not so much a story of one against another, but something much more familiar — that is, a struggle between "you" and another "you." You've probably noticed that you are often quick to despise the person who reminds you of what you wish to be, but are not. It is about your old enemy, the desire to be first, and the fear of being replaced.

Even though the story is an old one, it is repeated over and over again. You can read in the news today about struggles between a surrogate mother and the other mother, and the legal arguments about what constitutes "motherhood" and the true identity of a child's "parents."

Whether it's a child you want or something else that you think stands in the way of your becoming a full human being, it's always tempting to engineer a shortcut of one kind or another. It's easy to try to get there from here, even if it means doing the implausible or the downright dangerous. It is when you feel inadequate or unfulfilled that you are tempted to do the most foolish things. And then, because you never want to blame yourself, you turn your anger outward and lash out at what seems to be displacing you.

Where does God fit into this story? I can see progress in our human understanding of God. Instead of making deals and handing out punishment, God in this story is acting very much the part of a mother. While human beings are fighting with each other, fearing that there is not enough love or blessing to go around, God steps in with assurance that there is.

The story says over and over again that you cannot force the future, and you cannot force God. Whether you identify with Abraham in his confusion, with Sarah in her desperation, or with Hagar in her powerlessness, the story reminds you that your best intentions to rig the future can go bad, and that your shortcuts often don't get you to the desired destination.

Our culture tells people in many ways to "take matters into your own hands," to be masters of your destiny, the captain of your ship, the one who makes the future what it ought to be. But there are some things in life that cannot be forced, and the more you try, the more trouble you get yourself into. Figuring out the difference between what you can do and what only God can do is not always easy, but it is a sacred obligation.

As for these two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and the great nations that came from them, how ironic that they are torn with such hatred. If the story was meant to explain how the world came

to be the way it is, then in fact when Jews and Arabs are killing one another, as they have for thousands of years and are today, it is “half-brothers” killing each other. Both claim to be the children of Abraham, but they are unable to make peace. Both are children of the same father but each claims a different covenant and God’s special favor.

Think of it metaphorically. Born of different mothers, but children of the same father. This is the secret of our survival. It always has been. We trace our family tree, and we assume that God has chosen us in a special way, but we are rooted, every one of us, in the soil of the same Creator, the one who made us daughters and sons in the same human family.

We fight. We say things that cannot be unsaid. We split up. Families then and families now can be a minefield of division and separation. But nothing changes the fact that we belong, ultimately, to one another, and we need to go home.

The good news is that God made a covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. God also made a covenant with Hagar and Ishmael. God made a covenant with each one of us. The fact is, God has no favorites. Maybe someday it will happen — the family reunion. Maybe we will remember that in God there is neither Arab nor Jew, black nor white, slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in the family of God. Amen.