Book 44

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**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, the family as we know it, is in trouble."

You may be surprised to hear me say today that I don't agree with these statements. Here's the way

I would say it. The institution of marriage has always had its difficulties and so has the family. There was never a kind of "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

models and practices we should not emulate. We can rejoice that they are a thing of the past.

For example, in the Old Testament of the Bible, one common practice followed by the leading patriarchs such as Abraham was that of "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

contractual arrangement between the husband-to-be and the father of the bride. A woman was taken from the household of her father into the household of her husband; and money or goods or labor could flow in the other direction, that is from the husband to the father-in-law. In this biblical view of marriage, the woman was simply moved from the domain of one patriarch to the domain of 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 the version found 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 a

number of other examples of biblical views of marriage 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 the 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 1850's it was not surprising for an essayist to write about marriage in the United States: "The

husband acquires from the union increased capacity 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 the influence of the common law extended into the mid-twentieth century. As recently as 1996, congressional debate on the Defense of Marriage Act reiterated long-lived official insistence on 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" come from which they want to restore.

Unfortunately there are still some branches of the Christian Church 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, now 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, also an example of surrogate parenting, and the pathos of its biological success and its spiritual failure.

The story of Sarah, Abraham's wife and Hagar her 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 make them unite. It ends up pitting them against each other. It turns them into rivals and finally separates 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 maid, Hagar to her husband, so that, in her words, "I shall obtain children by her." 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 get's sticky, real sticky.

Consider Sarah's pain. She makes her husband an offer which 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 has been taught to believe that her primary purpose was to produce children. Having "failed" in this, how can she even consider herself a

human being? So she offers her maid Hagar to Abraham. 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 obtains her consent. She is a slave and had to do what was commanded. Women slaves have been used like this throughout history.

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

In retaliation, the story goes that 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 so she 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 became pregnant and gave 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 with her son Ishmael. She didn't want her son Isaac to be in competition with Ishmael for being the heir of Abraham.

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 with me? On the surface, of course, it's a story about one kind of sibling rivalry, that 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 desperate. It also shows that just because one has known oppression, as Sarah did in being the property of her husband, there is no guarantee that he or she will spare others when they have the power.

As to 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 that 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

you have of sharing your world, or being unable to control the future.

Even though the story is an old one, it is repeated over and over again. You can read in the news those stories today about struggle 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 your 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

convince yourself that despite the odds, you can 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 you 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 of everything to go around, God is around to help pick up the pieces.

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, or 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, that your shortcuts often don't get you the desired destination.

Our culture tells people in many different ways to "take matters in 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 as they are today, it is "half-brothers" killing each other. Both claim to be the children of

Abraham, but unable to make peace. Both are children of the same father, but each claiming 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, everyone 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 and 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.