

“Not an Option”

Carol Christensen broke my heart in high school. Actually it would be truer to say that I broke my own heart. She just sort of stood by in detached amusement while I escalated my infatuation, convinced myself of the tragic hopelessness of my cause, engaged in painfully awkward, inappropriate and self-defeating courtship behavior and then wretchedly and dramatically pined away. She didn't have to do very much... so she didn't. Every now and again, if I appeared on the verge of finding another focus for my life, she might offer some faint expression of interest—just enough to keep me stuck. I thought it all very tragic; but “pathetic” is more like it. It never occurred to me to attempt an actual relationship and see where that might go. I was too much in love.

Convinced that I had been abused, I privately—well OK, not always privately—resorted to ridicule. Our high school was in Winnetka, Illinois. I was born in Pittsburgh, certainly funny enough in its own right. But Carol came from the oddly exotic state of Nebraska, a place I had never been and had barely heard of, which my cursory research revealed to me to be a primitive backwater. Just looking at a map would tell you there was nothing there: a couple of pseudo-cities in the east and then nothing, not even any roads to speak of in the rest of it. Their football team was the “Cornhuskers”: Oooh, sounds *ferocious!* An ocean of red polyester Neanderthals chanting, “Go Big Red!” This demanded ridicule from my sensitive, sophisticated self. To risk sounding biblical about it, can anything good come out of Nebraska?¹ William Jennings Bryan? Henry Fonda? Marlin Perkins? Oh, please!! I discovered that I hated everything about Nebraska. It was a perfect hatred: delicious, cheap, ignorant, easy and energizing. How silly to think that she could hurt me: she was from *Nebraska*. My favorite team was the Pitt Panthers and my second favorite team was whoever was playing Nebraska.

Well, you know how life is. Imagine my surprise when my best friend from college turned out to be from Omaha. And a mere ten years after I graduated from high school I found myself moving to Nebraska, where I lived happily for seventeen years—still longer than I've lived anywhere else—and where I met some of the most wonderful people on the face of the earth, including our two adopted sons, both native Cornhuskers. And then of course there's this: Go Big Red!

I bring all this up because it's a safe and fairly trivial example of a deeply challenging spiritual truth. If you believe in the God of the Bible—the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus—hating other people is not an option. Because in the final analysis there are no *other* people. There is only us: all of us, one family. We can't hate people because of where they come from or the language they speak or the way they worship or because they wear red polyester as though any of that made them less than human.

¹ According to John's Gospel, Nathanael, upon hearing that Jesus was from Nazareth, asked, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46)

Fashionably challenged, perhaps, but not less than human. As we've been reminded recently, "different" is not "deficient."²

The point is made with great clarity in the remarkably complex story of Abraham. It's a story worth revisiting in case you missed either or both of the first two installments. Abraham is God's do-over. God has not given up on the dream for God's good creation, a dream in which all the elements of creation will exist in their proper relationship to one another; and God's peace, God's shalom, will permeate all things. That dream went awry when first Adam and Eve and then pretty much everybody else decided that they wanted to be God. God tried starting over broad stroke with the flood. And then when that didn't work out, God started over on a much smaller scale, calling an unpromising person named Abram and promising him that he'd have many offspring (Abram was 75 and childless at the time), would inherit a land to be known hereafter as the Promised Land, and that through Abram and his wife Sarai all the peoples of earth would come to know God and be blessed. For reasons not completely clear perhaps even to himself, Abram said Yes to God.

Last week we read together the wonderful story where God in the form of three strangers visits Abraham as he is now called and his wife Sarah as she is now called and renews the promise that they will have a child. By this time Abraham is a hundred and Sarah a sprightly ninety; so they both laugh at this news—at the wonder of it no less than the absurdity. But God has a sense of humor, too, and so the child's name will be Isaac, from the Hebrew word for laughter. Maybe his nickname was Punch Line.

But along the way there has sprouted a complicated subplot, and we need to double back a bit to pick up that thread. Way back when Abraham was only 87 or so, about thirteen years into God's promise with no prospects in sight, Abram and Sarai (as they then still were) took matters into their own hands. It was Sarai's idea. She suggested that Abram get together with her Egyptian servant named Hagar to see if maybe Hagar could produce an heir for Abraham. They give it a try, and it works.

But there are always unintended consequences. Hagar is so delighted to be pregnant that she begins to taunt her mistress Sarai. And Sarai is so devastated by the taunting that she really takes it out on Hagar with harsh treatment, and Hagar runs off into the desert. In the desert an angel of the LORD finds Hagar and asks her what she's doing out in the middle of nowhere. Like Dorothy Gale she says she's running away. The angel tells Hagar to go back and submit herself to Sarai and God will make it worth her while: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." In those days that was a real measure of greatness, so the angel has Hagar's attention.

Then the angel tells her that her child will be named "Ishmael," which means "God hears," just as God has heard Hagar in her distress. And then this (and I'm not making this up): "He shall be a wild ass of a man with his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him." For some reason I always think of the World Wrestling Federation when I read those words, or maybe the Jerry Springer Show: "He shall be a

² So said Jeremiah Wright in his address to the Detroit NAACP in May. Probably not a lot of people are quoting Wright in sermons these days.

wild ass of a man.” That doesn’t sound too appealing to me, but Hagar seems to like the sound of it. So she goes back to Abram and Sarai and gives birth to Ishmael. Shortly thereafter Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah so we don’t have to worry about keeping the names straight any more.

Now this might not be what everybody would hope for, this wild ass of a man in the works, but at least it feels a bit like progress. After all, prior to this there had been thirteen years of nothing; now at least there is an heir apparent. Well, if you do the math Ishmael is thirteen when the three visitors come to see Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre, and he’s fourteen—old enough to baby-sit—when his half brother Isaac is born.

We pick up the story today at the party they used to have when a child was weaned. Getting to the point of eating real food was nothing to take for granted in those days, or in many parts of the world yet today; so a celebration was appropriate, a rite of passage, a stepping stone. Maybe there were balloons, and hot dogs in honor of the weaner Sarah and the wean-ee, Isaac—works either way.

But at the party there is an ominous moment. Sarah looks over and sees Ishmael playing with Isaac and a chill goes through her. Isaac is now maybe... two? Ishmael would be about sixteen. He’s beginning to grow hair all over and starting to look a bit like the predictions about him. Sarah freaks out and demands of Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” She’s having a bad heir day.

But really there’s nothing funny about it. Abraham, to his credit, hates the idea of sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the wilderness. But God—not an angel—tells Abraham to do as Sarah says; that Abraham’s line will descend through Isaac; but that God will look out for Ishmael, of whom God will also make a great nation.

The theory sounds OK, but the execution of it starts out badly. It is heart-wrenching to envision Abraham saying goodbye to Hagar and Ishmael, rising early in the morning to bid farewell to these people whom at least at some level he loves. Ishmael has been his only son, his only heir, for many years. Hagar has given him hope in his old age. Abraham gives them food and as much water as they can carry, knowing that it will not be enough. Off they go into the wilderness to die. As the water runs out and Ishmael is too weak to walk, Hagar leaves him in the shade and staggers away to a distance where at least she will not have to watch him die. Maybe she’ll even beat him to it. Either way her life is over. She sobs.

It says that God heard the voice of the boy. But God hears them both, for it is to Hagar that an angel comes with the message of salvation: “Do not be afraid.” God’s promises will be fulfilled. Hagar struggles to her feet to return to her son and on the way to him she finds water.

If there are elements here that sound vaguely familiar to us, they are all the more familiar as they resonate through the family stories of Israel, stories of the Exodus. There are ties to Egypt: Hagar is an Egyptian and Ishmael will marry an Egyptian woman. There are abandoned children, Ishmael and Moses. As God heard the cries of Hagar and Ishmael, so will God hear the cries of the slaves in Egypt. In both cases the people of promise are lost in the wilderness, where God provides water, sustenance and hope.

Eventually they are delivered to strength, even greatness. Obviously this story does not mark the end of God's dealings with the children of Ishmael. God makes promises to Ishmael just as God makes promises to the children of Isaac, and all of them are children of Abraham. The branches diverge here; but it's the same tree. And in a sense it's the same story, one great story.

Ishmael will later reappear along with Isaac to help lay to rest their father, Abraham. Ishmael will have twelve sons, parallel to the twelve sons of Jacob who will become the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau, Jacob's twin brother, will marry one of the descendants of Ishmael. The stories intertwine.

They still do. Terrence Fretheim puts it into perspective, writing that because of Ishmael, "Nearly one billion Muslims, 85 percent of whom live outside the Middle East, call Abraham father, too. Even more, they are descendants of God's promise to Ishmael, which remains a theological reality."³

But let's be clear. Each of the great Abrahamic faiths is distinctive. God cares about people of all faiths. But as children of Abraham Jews, Christians and Muslims are all children of promise. Jews claim a special line of promise through Isaac; Christians through Jesus; Muslims through Mohammed. Each is distinctive. But we have an overblown tendency to focus on the differences as though truth were a zero sum game; as though each successive revelation necessarily superceded all that went before. But this amazing story of Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael, Sarah and Isaac, is a wonderful reminder that we cannot insist on the otherness of these members of the family. If God is still speaking, and speaking somewhat differently in the dialects of different faiths, we have much to learn from one another.

Hatred relies on seeing the other as different from and less than. The story of the Bible in all its richness makes that impossible. Look in the family album and we all find our pictures in there; go back far enough and there is Father Abraham. The oneness of humankind is a reflection of the oneness of God. And the dream for creation is still alive, even in Nebraska. Thanks be to God.

Amen

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³ Fretheim, Terrence. *Genesis in The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, page 490.