

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
June 25, 2017

“Whose Voice Gets Heard?”

“... Hagar lifted up her voice and wept.
And God heard the voice of the boy (Ishmael);
and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven ...”
Genesis 21:16-17

PRELUDE

The reception of new members into the life of the church is always a significant occasion. This morning we have received as large a number of members (20) as I can recall in my time with Plymouth Church, which magnifies the significance. And there is such a mass of varied talent and experience, which gives some pause, to think what might become because of it.

I hope and pray the journey we share will be good and rewarding for the whole of Plymouth; I hope and pray we will merit the trust that the reception of new members demonstrates.

I hope and pray that we - together - grow in our capacity and conviction to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves.

I hope and pray that we - together - maintain vision, that we make plain the power and promise of Christ's love, by advancing a just world for all.

I hope and pray that we - together - bound by our embrace of God's grace,

keep clear the resolve to
welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.

Plymouth Church will not,
Plymouth Church should not
 be the same because of the
 promises - the covenant -
 we have made today.

And that is a good thing,
worthy to praise the God who
 believes in us enough
 to make the occasion possible.

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During the weeks of summer I often turn my preaching
attention to the lectionary readings
that come from the Old Testament.
Keeping with that practice, many of our scripture lessons
in June, July, and August will be coming from the book of
Genesis. This will give us opportunity to reacquaint
ourselves with the recorded drama of our faith ancestors:
the likes of Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob's dream,
his vision of a ladder connecting heaven and earth;
 and Jacob's rather complicated marital relations with
 two sisters, Leah and Rachel;
and Jacob's subsequent wrestling with God,
and the wounding of his hip, giving him a limp,
gaining him a new name (Israel);
 and with Joseph, Jacob's highly -favored child, given
 a coat of many colors, prompting fierce fraternal
 jealousy between sibling rivals, such that Joseph was
 castaway, sold to merchants bound for Egypt.

These stories cover four generations of faith and family
intrigue; and we will look and listen to see how they serve
 to anchor and advance our lives today.

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Our lesson this morning, from
Genesis 21:8-21, is rather complicated.

It was complicated, in the beginning,
by God,
who delivered a promise:
Abraham - you and Sarah will have a child,
and from that child, you'll have more descendents
than you can imagine.

Abraham was told -
from the child to be born from Sarah,
you'll be honored and recognized as
father to a multitude of nations.

Please note the plural here.
The promise of being a progenitor
is not confined to one nation,
but to a multitude.

That translates as a lot.
It is lodged in our UCC Statement of Faith,
where the Holy Spirit is credited with
**“creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ,
binding in covenant faithful people of all ages,
tongues and races.”**

You may recall that Abraham once was
led out under an open sky and directed:
**“Look toward heaven and
count the stars,
if you are able.”**

And then God said:

“So shall your descendents be.”

“So shall thy seed be” (KJV).

(see Genesis 15:4-6) - beyond the eye to see,
greater than the mind can calculate.

It was complicated, in the beginning,
because Abraham and Sarah were old
and faded, and in their own estimate
beyond prime time.
They couldn't see the many God promised,
because they couldn't see one God delivered.

It is complicated, for Sarah hatched a
plan for a surrogate, volunteering Hagar,
her Egyptian maid, her unpaid domestic attendant.
Hagar, Sarah's slave girl, was conscripted
into Sarah's scheme;
without contractual protections;
without health insurance or benefits.
Hagar, handed to Abraham,
who "**listened to the voice of Sarai**" (Genesis 16:2).

A child was born from the tent time tryst
shared between Abraham and Hagar;
Ishmael by name; and so the complications multiply.

Hagar, holding Ishmael, is full of biological pride –
and she couldn't resist looking down
on her mistress.

Sarah has family planning remorse;
she blames Abraham for consenting to
do what couldn't be undone,
which he really didn't want to undo,
because he liked Ishmael.

But to keep peace with Sarah,
who has superior standing
in the household pecking order,
he turned a blind eye to
Sarah's cruel scorn of Hagar,
whom she treated harshly (Genesis 16:6).

It's complicated, this ancient family of faith.
The house is seething with fury,
full of rage and envy and enmity.

The pressure builds, when Sarah's child,
Isaac, arrives, and it reaches a peak
with Isaac is weaned, when he toddles
off the breast, when the toddler Isaac
discovers play with the older Ishmael.
That's when the lid pops off the pressure cooker,
and Sarah determines the family tent
isn't big enough for
 the mother and child
 she plotted to conceive.

Sarah orders Abraham:
castaway the slave
 and her offspring.

Abraham was not agreeable;
 but he gets nudged by God,
who urged him to listen to Sarah.

So off they go - the discarded,
 the disposable,
 mother and child,
wandering in the wilderness,
 without residence or forwarding
 address,
until the provisions for their journey
are depleted, and they find themselves
seemingly on the doorstep of death.

And then, one of the strange twists in scripture;
we read: **"Hagar lifted up her voice and wept."**

And we read: **"God heard the voice of the boy;"**

And we read:

“and the angel of God called to Hagar,”
who reports **“God has heard the voice of boy.”**

Whose voice gets heard?

This is the compelling question,
at least as I encounter this Genesis story.

Whose voice gets heard?

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The story of the family feud
Abraham, trying to keep peace with
Sarah and Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael,
is a twice-told tale in Genesis. It is not
a disposable text, that we can assign
to the shredder. It helps inform our
vision of brokering peace in a broken world,
and understanding, and realizing
the possibility of respectful co-existence
between the great religions that trace their
spiritual DNA through the divine promise
traced through Abraham.

We endanger ourselves,
and we discredit our faith,
when we insulate ourselves
from the world and all its wonder,
when we restrict what voices get heard.

Indiana University, just a couple of years ago (December 2015),
published research on the dangers that accrue from
accessing news and information primarily via social media.
This amounts to being informed,
getting our news, through second/third hand sources,
not primary sources, which should be more reliable.
Social media tends to “filter” news and information,

it is more expressive of opinion rather than facts;
it reinforces perceptions we
hold and want to guard, and want to hear
as an affirmation of our worldview.

The term employed in the study:
we are drawn, via social media,
to “**information bubbles.**”

The church, at its best,
is an information
bubble for an array of voices –

the church, at its best, is a people who are
attuned to voices often silenced, or marginalized,
or voices simply ignored,
because they seemingly don't count.

The church should not reduce our listening
capacity – rather it should enlarge our ear and
our understanding.

This pertains to how we honor and respect each
other – and to how we honor and respect others
whose live by choice or circumstance outside of
a church circle.

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Whose voice gets heard?

Listening can be hard work;
it is not without danger,
being censored, cast off, dismissed
for who you are and because
of who you listen to.

What's the proverbial slang?
The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

Carl Sandburg:

**“The squeaky wheel may get the grease,
but the quaking duck gets shot.”**

Or, as the Japanese say:

**“The nail that stands out
gets pounded down.”**

It is our understanding of gospel that we are called to listen for voices – and relate with people – where compassion and understanding are needed.

It is our understanding of gospel that we are directed to serve where the need is great for the love of Jesus to be shared.

It is our understanding of gospel that we be patient and kind and daring, and that if we get pounded down, we prove resilient and courageous to get back up.

It is our prayer that our hearts not grow cold in a world too often cruel and callous and disregarding of the cries of them that suffer.

When we, as church, turn a deaf ear to the cries that rise to God – we have forfeited our calling to be gospel people.

And the cries aren't just the cries of humanity. Al Gore has reminded us, yet again, “Mother Nature is screaming,” but too few are listening.”

Pause with me here.

I was reading the other day of a study, a survey from the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy,

and they discovered that 7% of American adults think chocolate milk comes from brown cows. Not a great percentage, but enough to number a little over 17 million people.

These are not people confined to some special place reserved for the mentally challenged. They are driving cars, texting, showing up at work; they may be sitting in a cabinet and running some department in a great nation.

Now we might harshly judge such a people: What is it some say ... they don't have the good sense God gave a stick? And maybe they don't. But God has an ear for such a people when they pray, and God has a heart for such a people when they stumble.

God cares about people who don't know their right from their left hand, a people keeping watch over many animals (Jonah 4:11).

And we know Jesus cares - Jesus listens - Jesus is lodged with the misjudged, who don't have what others take for granted; the hungry and homeless, and those in prison, the sick, the designated alien and stranger (Matthew 25).

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CONCLUSION

Whose voice gets heard?

If God's eye is on the sparrow,
God's ear is open to the plight of the stricken,
the ignored, the abandoned.
The God we trust, to whom we pledge our allegiance,
listens to each and all;

and when we are so alive and alert,
we bring hope and healing to the land
and its many peoples.
We make way for the future
God's intends. Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*