



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 7 (A)

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[RCL] **Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39**

In today's Gospel, the tail-end of a commencement speech of sorts, Jesus prepares his twelve closest followers for their first mission apart from him. They are to demonstrate what God's Kingdom looks like, interrupting life-as-they-knew-it with new possibilities for healing, wholeness, truth-telling, and repaired relationships. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus empowered them to do the things Jesus does: cast out demons, heal people with every kind of sickness, teach about God's ways. It is a small miracle that Jesus trusts them with such spiritual authority so early in their understanding of who he really is. This miracle of Jesus' confidence in his twelve bumbling disciples offers us hope. We, too, struggle to comprehend Jesus' power and "keep the faith," as Presiding Bishop Curry frequently reminds us – yet we are sent out anyway to proclaim the Good News amid daily life.

You can imagine Jesus on the cusp of sending his twelve naïve disciples when he pauses to equip them with a final spiritual gift: the ability to persevere in the face of resistance. He doesn't sugarcoat the dangers of the mission; he gives it to them straight: "Some folks will welcome the Good News, others won't. They'll resist the message and the change that comes with it. And you'll be the target of their resistance." Then, like a good pastor, he reminds them that our Heavenly Father is both incredibly powerful – pronouncing judgments that yield life or death – and incredibly tender – noticing every sparrow that falls and counting every hair on our heads. By remembering the character and faithfulness of God, the disciples have what they need in order to endure beyond their fear of rejection and violence.

Jesus' speech before the sending of his disciples is only one moment of their lifelong process of character formation – one moment in a life full of learning what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus shows the twelve: who they truly are – children of God; what they are capable of when they are aligned with God's grace – healing others and reconciling communities; and how to hold onto that truth even when the going gets tough – by remembering God's character, God's faithfulness, God's goodness.

It took years of hanging out with Jesus, eating with him, watching him heal others, speaking truth to power, listening to his teachings, and overhearing his prayers for them to become the kind of men – and women, for we know Jesus had women disciples, too – who were willing to lose their lives as martyrs,

testifying to God's shalom, God's peace, in a world still enraptured by powers and principalities. Christian identity and character formation are lifelong processes.

One of the most troubling things about this passage to our ears is Jesus' talking about division in the family. We tend to idealize the nuclear family in our culture and thus, often idolize it. Many of us downplay family conflict. We are embarrassed by it. Admitting that our families are imperfect can feel sacrilegious. At the same time, having a "difficult childhood" seems to be a cultural norm, rather than an exception.

Psychologists tell us that a key developmental task for young adulthood is differentiating from one's families of origin. This doesn't mean estrangement, but rather, figuring out how one can authentically be oneself and stay connected to the family or others. For example, if a young adult chooses to live a life of radical simplicity in a family that values climbing the social ladder, the family will have to navigate new ways of being together. The reality is that not every family has those navigational skills. Sometimes, literally and figuratively, it is beneficial, or even necessary, to be apart from our families of origin before God grants us the grace to reunite with them in life-giving ways.

The peace that Jesus brings causes division and incites harassment and resistance. This is not forever, but for now, in this in-between time when values of the "Old Self," which Paul discusses in Galatians, still have sway. We all have an Old Self – our sinful, fear-filled, greedy, prideful nature – that is left behind, crucified with Jesus on the cross, in our baptisms. Then we are re-born, freed from sin into a new life.

That doesn't mean that the Old Self doesn't try to pull us back down; it does, and it can pull our loved ones down, too. As Jesus equipped the first disciples long ago, so today he equips us with the power of the Holy Spirit to confront the death-dealing ways of the Old Self and participate in Christ's triumph over them. By virtue of our baptisms, we find a new dimension of family beyond blood kin in the Church. There, we learn Sunday by Sunday about forgiveness, being released from what enslaves us, so that we can move joyfully into God's future. By hearing the Scripture, week by week, day by day, the Spirit equips us with knowledge of God's character – both the almighty maker of Heaven and Earth and the merciful Lord who watches over the sparrow. We come to know God, almighty and gentle, by remembering stories like the one we heard earlier about Hagar.

Hagar's story shows God's grace working in and through a very divided family. Sarah, Hagar's mistress, is bound up by anxiety and fear. Hagar dutifully conceived a son at Sarah's request with her master Abraham and bore Ishmael. But now, Sarah is afraid that Ishmael may be favored more than her boy, Isaac. Though Sarah has literally borne the fruit of God's promises through the birth of Isaac, her Old Self (to borrow St. Paul's language) has gotten the best of her, and she can't abide even the presence of Hagar. Abraham is caught, not only between these two women but by his genuine affection for his first-born, Ishmael.

The family can't tolerate Sarah's anxious need to be assured that her son, Isaac, will be heir to God's promises. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out of the family to die in the wilderness. At first glance, this seems like a win-lose situation, with Sarah securing a future for her son Isaac, while Hagar and Ishmael perish. It

is so human of us, isn't it, to assume that God's promises and God's grace are limited to our either/or thinking?

This story shows that God's grace is bigger than we can imagine. God's faithfulness is worked out in ways we can't anticipate, and over the lifelong process of becoming a disciple, we learn to trust God. Like the disciples, we are sometimes sent out on risky missions, warned and equipped to face the danger. Other times, like Hagar and Ishmael, we are cast out into the wilderness without any choice. But even there, we discover God's grace goes before us.

We learn to respond to division, harassment, even estrangement with greater patience and confidence, trusting that in the long game, in the End Time – and often before – God's mission of reconciliation of the Old Self and the New Self, of Sarah and Hagar, of Isaac and Ishmael, and of families divided by politics or money or jealousy or addiction, will be accomplished. Amen.

*This week's sermon was written by **the Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer** for Proper 7A in 2020.*