

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit

Heroes are important. Ted Williams, the greatest hitter who ever lived, was a hero of mine. Historically I have always been partial to Sam Houston, who fought and failed to keep Texas in the Union in 1861 at the start of the civil war, and to William Wilberforce, one of our church calendar saints, who though it took him 30 years, persuaded the parliament in London to abolish the slave trade and slavery in the British Empire. We have heroes too in the Church and in scripture, great men and women who serve as examples for us today, who by their actions give significant new meaning to the notion of family values.

Take Abraham, or as Sarah likely said on occasion, take Abraham, please. Even in our relatively enlightened 21<sup>st</sup> century, I cannot imagine a social worker or a court countenancing the adoption of a child by a couple 98 years old. It just wouldn't happen. Well adoption hadn't really kicked in as a socially acceptable alternative in family planning 4000 years ago, nor had infertility been recognized as a medical subspecialty. So what were our spiritual ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, to do? Now please, do not try this at home. After years of truly fruitless efforts, Sarah finally said to Abraham, "Why don't you and my lady in waiting, Hagar, give it a shot?" We know that Abraham probably should have had enough common sense to say "Honey, you don't really mean that, do you? You are just as lovely now as when I married you 78 years ago, and I only have eyes for you."

Abraham though, still a stud and legend in his own mind, quickly agreed to make that sacrifice, only of course because Sarah had suggested it. This is the same Abraham who a little earlier in the story had been, how shall I put it on the Sabbath in this holy place, his wife's agent so to speak.

This sense of family values remained in the family too. Abraham's grandson Jacob flat out lied, cheated, and stole his father's inheritance from his brother Esau. Try that today and he would wind up in the joint. Then there is another spiritual ancestor of ours, Moses, the only one in all of Scripture chosen to confront God face to face, the Moses who led the children of Israel out of bondage, through the Red Sea waters, right up to the promised land. This same Moses had his picture on the bulletin boards of post offices in Cairo and Luxor, wanted for murder, and was likely featured on Egypt's Most Wanted, on Sphinx TV on Saturday night. Yet another example of good old fashioned Biblical family values, about which we will be hearing more before this election year is over.

To return to Abraham though, after his weekend with Hagar, she was found to be great with child, doubtless contributing to Abraham's opinion of himself at age 98 or whatever, and their son Ishmael resulted. On the playgrounds of the town the boy probably introduced himself by saying "Call me Ishmael." Well Sarah, never mind that this was her idea, was simply undone. The whole neighborhood now knew it was she who was infertile, so she pitched a fit and

demanded that Abraham get rid of Hagar and Ishmael. Father Abraham by and large did as he was told, as long as it was God or Sarah doing the telling, so he put Hagar and their son Ishmael out to pasture, worse actually, out in the wilderness, apparently to die. These are tough stories, from our great family values book, not the sort for bedtime reading to small children. Happily, God heard the cry of the child Ishmael, rescued mother and child with the divine promise “I will make a great nation of him.” And from Ishmael’s descendants 4600 odd years later came Islam, one of the three great monotheistic or one-God religions, together with Judaism and Christianity. Muslim, Jew, and Christian, as Anne suggested last week, we are all descendants of Abraham. As is said elsewhere in Scripture, “A wandering Aramean was my father.” So, tough as some of this stuff is, it is our family history, which makes some folks we might not have suspected relatives of ours. In a way I suppose everybody won. Sarah was happy, she could once again hold her head up at the local Hadassah or sodality. Abraham stayed on Sarah’s good side, Hagar and Ishmael not only survived but prospered, and God was likely no more exasperated than usual at these difficult creatures of his benevolence.

In common with most western Christians, my knowledge of Islam is pretty limited. I have a Qur’an, a nice edition the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Washington sends out for free. I picked it up this week expecting to find a lot about Ishmael. There are eight passing references to him in the entire book, just identifying him

as the son of Abraham. His mother Hagar is not mentioned at all. When we, Christians and Jews, speak of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible patriarchs, we speak of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so on. That's the way the genealogy of Jesus begins in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew. In the Qur'an though it is always Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac.

The world is so much smaller now than it once was. All four of my grandparents were born before the Wright Brothers flew at Kitty Hawk 105 years ago. Radar and jet engines have been around only as long as I have. My children think I remember the Alamo and the Maine, but you know better, even though I no longer get carded. Time was when we didn't have to know about Islam, but that time is long gone. Duke University and the armed forces now have Muslim chaplains. Probably stemming in large part from the work of the late Malcolm X, who found his Islamic faith in prison, Islam is booming in American prisons. Now to be sure not all conversions have great depth, but that's true of any faith. In my own prison experience we usually got along well. I remember a visit Bishop Estill made to the prison chapel. The week before I had told my flock there, which averaged 15-20 a service, that the bishop was coming next week and we needed to have a good turnout. Well I thought no more of it until he and I walked into a packed chapel the next week. There were twice as many as usual, but if you looked closely, or even not too closely, you noticed a number of the newcomers wore those stereotypical crocheted caps, and their names tended to be

Muhammad, Hassan, Ali and the like. They pulled it off beautifully though, each one greeting the bishop and telling him how much the ministry of the Episcopal Church meant to them. A prison con is a special breed indeed, but you know it did show how Christians and Muslims can work together. After all, we are both of us children of Abraham. By and large, most Muslims do look a bit different from many of us, as do many Hispanics, and looking different can make us uneasy. I like what the President has said about growing up with Mexican children in Midland, Texas, going to school with Mexican children, having Mexican friends and neighbors, and so on. His point was that unlike folks in Iowa and Wisconsin, and he might have added North Carolina, living among Mexicans was neither a new experience nor a bad experience. We aren't afraid of the familiar. The 30 foot wall along the Mexican border was an idea born not in Texas but in the Midwest. Of course the Governor of Arizona said "Show me a 30 foot wall and I'll show you a 31 foot ladder." I was reminded of the President's thoughts on this issue which so divides the country when I spent two nights recently in El Paso, Except for a few soldiers from Fort Bliss, I didn't see any non-Hispanics.

I remember when there were two Chinese restaurants in the entire Triangle area, one in Raleigh and one here in Durham. Now there must be a hundred. Chinese folks are no longer a novelty. Duke has several hundred Chinese students. We don't give it a second thought when we encounter Chinese or Chinese-Americans, and the day will come when Muslims and Mexicans are

neither a novelty nor a concern. Stevie Wonder can't see any difference. Does he perhaps have an advantage over the rest of us? And of course I haven't even mentioned the black/white divide which has been a factor in all aspects in our life in this country, including Christian worship, for almost 400 years now. Nor Indians, or First Nation peoples as they are known in Canada. I say Indian advisedly, for there were many in my prison congregation over 17 years. By the time the Episcopal Church geared up to go west in the 19th century, all other groups were taken, and we got the Indians. To this day the Episcopal Church is the predominant religious brand, if you will, in Indian communities in the western United States. I once mentioned to some of my prison flock, who had Dakota Sioux bibles and prayer books thanks to the Bishop of South Dakota, that I had never heard any of them use the term Native American. Their laughing response "Jim, only white social workers say Native American."

We have heard over and over Paul's teaching that in Christ there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, neither Greek nor Jew, and so forth. Paul would likely not mind if we put a bit of a 21<sup>st</sup> century gloss on that thought, and add neither Arab nor Mexican, neither Palestine nor Chinese, neither Indian nor Japanese, neither gay nor straight. In the portion of his letter to the Church at Rome we heard earlier, Paul tells us Christ died for all. Think about that. Is anyone excluded?

Early on in the war in the Pacific, in a unique happening, an American ship met a Japanese ship at sea for an exchange of interned diplomats. Sailors manned the rails, and a Japanese sailor began singing a spiritual, and an American sailor joined in. Together they sang:

In Christ there is no East or West, in  
him no South or North, but one great  
fellowship of love throughout the  
whole wide earth.

I think they were on to something. Family values.

Amen.

St. Luke's

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