

# Sermon for Sunday, June 25, 2023

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“Kindness Amid Regrets”

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Decorah, Iowa

Genesis 21: 8-21. [Click here to read scripture story for today.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

If only...

What if?

I regret...

No regrets.

What do we do with regrets, with that feeling that things could have been different? I just read a story about a woman named Jane Parker who says she has never regretted anything in her life. “I made all my choices in good faith, so how can I regret anything?” she explained to a forgiveness researcher who had come to interview her. Yet as the researcher prepared to leave, Jane began to look uncomfortable. “You know, there is one thing I do regret,” she admitted, “I need to be perfectly honest here. I regret saying something [harsh] to my father [when my mother was dying.]”

How do we deal with regret in our personal lives, and as we look at the world around us? If only we’d paid attention to climate scientists earlier. What if that election had gone differently? If only I hadn’t said that. What if I’d known that then?

I wonder if regret is what makes Sarah treat Hagar and Ishmael so badly. We need a little back-story to get at what’s happening in our story for today. After years of waiting, Sarah’s son Isaac is finally born. She rejoices with laughter and calls everyone to laugh with her. Yet, as her child ages, something casts a shadow over this joy for Sarah; or rather, *someone* casts a shadow - Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son. Whenever Sarah looks at Ishmael, she feels anger. She feels jealous and protective of her own son.

And, I wonder if Sarah also wants to kick herself. Ishmael wouldn’t even exist if not for her. It was Sarah’s idea to have Abraham conceive a child with Hagar, the woman they’d enslaved. Sarah had been waiting so long for God to keep the promise of a son. She was getting weary and impatient. So, she took matters into her own hands. She told Abraham to go into Hagar and Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah, rather than the voice of God. Hagar conceived and great tension grew between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah treated Hagar terribly and the pregnant Hagar fled to the wilderness. An angel of the Lord found her and told her to return to Sarah and Abraham, and promised that her soon to be born son would be a father of multitudes.

Now, Sarah sees Hagar’s child Ishmael every day. Everyday, Sarah must face the consequences of her failure to trust God. I imagine her regrets grow as Ishmael grows, and that these regrets harden and corrode Sarah’s life. I wonder if she beats herself up for it all, if she just wants to rid herself of the constant reminder of her own mistakes. After her own son is born and survives infancy,

Sarah can't take it anymore. She orders Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness.

This whole saga provokes great animosity between the descendants of Isaac and those of Ishmael, animosity that persists still today. Since Jews and Christians claim Abraham as the father of our faith, through Isaac's line, and Muslims claim Abraham through Ishmael's line.

If only ... What if?

If only Sarah and Abraham hadn't enslaved Hagar.

If only Sarah had trusted God.

What if Isaac and Ishmael had grown up together, under one roof?

If only there was more respect and understanding between all the children of Abraham. How would human history be different?

What do we do with regrets on a personal and global scale? How do we deal with the consequences of mistakes and failures: individual, generational, and collective sin? It might help to look at how God deals with it all. God shows great compassion to Sarah, as well as to Hagar and Ishmael. After Sarah unleashes this division in Abraham's household, God could say, that's it! Sarah, you messed up, I'm writing you out of the story, going to work only with Hagar and her son now. But that's not what happens. God keeps the promise to Sarah and her son is born. God brings Sarah laughter and rejoicing.

God could also say, oh ... this Hagar and Ishmael thing is not what I intended. Things will be a lot easier if we all just pretend that they never existed. God doesn't do that either. Both times that Hagar is wandering in the wilderness, God finds her, helps her, and makes promises to her. The first time, when she's pregnant with Ishmael, Hagar even gets to name God, naming him El-Roi the God who sees. She is the only person in all of scripture who gets to give God a name. The outcast is lifted up.

In her story, we see that God treasures Hagar and Ishmael as well as Sarah and Isaac, that God treasures all people, not just the chosen people. It's clear that Abraham and Sarah are chosen not because they're so morally superior, and that being chosen doesn't mean everything will be easy. Being chosen simply means God wants to bless the world through them. In the stories of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham, we see God's compassion and care for all of us broken people. This compassion provides a way forward.

When we are wandering in the wilderness, suffering the consequences of individual, generational, and collective sin, God sees us and hears our cries. God finds us and accompanies us with promise and provision. God's compassion can also help us live differently with regret. We can't change the past. Yet God guides us into more life-giving responses. If we beat ourselves up, we get hardened and harsh. If we try to banish any regrets, they'll likely persist in the margins of our lives and imaginations.

In our country, for instance, it doesn't work to deny the impact of enslaving human beings for generations. We need to face the consequences with compassion for everyone who's been impacted by this. As author Resmaa Menakem helps us see in his book *My Grandmother's Hands*, we all carry racialized trauma in our bodies because of centuries of chattel slavery. We all need compassion to work it through our bodies.

God's compassion provides a way forward. God guides us onto new paths - paths of kindness to ourselves, paths of kindness to others. God opens our eyes to provisions, to water, to life, that we had overlooked. God provides wellsprings of compassion, connection, and forgiveness in creation, in the sacraments, in our bodies, in community.

Hagar is right.

God is a God who sees.

God sees all our sin, all our regret, all the messes we've made.

Yet God looks upon us, upon you and me, with such love.

God leads us in the way of love, the only way forward.