

At the beginning of the service this morning we said together the collect of the day. You might not remember the words. I probably wouldn't either except that one of my rituals in preparing the sermon each week is to pray the collect for the day at the beginning and the end of my sermon preparation.

There's a great word in our collect this time; lovingkindness. It seems like an odd word in English because it's written as one word not two; lovingkindness. One of God's leading qualities, many Books of the Bible tell us is God's lovingkindness. In Hebrew the word is chesed. The closest that translators could get to this word in English is a combination of loving and kindness, although sometimes it is translated as mercy. But it's not exactly what we find God being and doing in the passage from Genesis today or the passage from the Gospel of Matthew.

Lovingkindness is the virtue that we most wish to find in both our heavenly father and in the fathers who raised us in this life. Happy Fathers' day to all of you fathers out there this morning. And happy Father's Day to **all** our fathers.

The father we encounter in our first reading from the book of Genesis is Abraham. He is a father who listens to his God and does what the Father in Heaven declares to him. God has promised to Abraham in covenant that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. God also promised that Abraham would have a great deal of land, herds and flocks. That's a big Father's Day promise. Abraham's promise to God was that he would have faith. And so he does.

When Abraham is told by God to have a child with the slave Hagar because of the need of an heir, he does so. And when he is told by God that miraculously, Sarah his wife, will also have a child, he is faithful to her. A part of this story is about the triangle of relationship that ensues between Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. This complicated relationship does not land well on our modern ears. You've got Hagar, a dark skinned slave who has dutifully done what she is told, and Sarah, a wealthy light skinned woman who is feeling very protective about her son's place in the ancestral line.

Hagar and her son are then expelled from the family – "given their freedom" and sent into the desert with very little food and water.. God says this is all part of the plan. Hmmm. Hard to see the lovingkindness of God here. But in God's plan it's OK to send Hagar and her son Ishmael away because God has a promise for them too. They will not be abandoned. And meanwhile through this, God secures Sarah's son, Isaac as the rightful heir of Abraham.

We are **meant** to have pity on Hagar as she is given little for her long journey. We **commiserate** with her when she is hungry and thirsty, and her son is weak. She puts him under a bush to die. But thanks to God's miraculous care, Ishmael and his mother survive their ordeal and Ishmael becomes the father of a great nation. Muslims consider Ishmael to be a prophet and that Muhammad was descended from him. Hagar is called a princess in the Islamic faith. Abraham is the father of three great religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Together they comprise the Abrahamic faiths.

Abraham was one prolific father, just as God promised. God showed his lovingkindness to all the characters in this story despite what must have been tense and difficult conversations in the family.

And just as division and family difficulties were a big part of this Genesis story, so are division and family difficulties a big part of what Jesus has to tell us today in our Gospel reading. An Episcopal priest recently said on a podcast I was listening to, called “Unholier than thou” that the Bible is all about peace and love. That caught my ear because yes, peace and love are central to the essence of God – God’s lovingkindness – but also, not everything in life is peace and love.

Jesus also turned over the tables of the money changers and Jesus also had disparaging words to say to some Jewish leaders at his time, “You brood of vipers” he called them. And as we read in our portion of Matthew’s Gospel today Jesus says “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” This is not to be taken literally.

All serious readers of the words of Jesus know that he had a penchant for hyperbole. If you want first century (or even 21st century) people to take interest and gather around to hear you speak, you might use words that perk up peoples’ ears and cause them to pay attention. Jesus goes on to say that if we want to follow him we might find ourselves in disagreements; with parents, in-laws and other members of our own house. The sword is a sword of division. Those who, like you and me, follow Jesus might find ourselves at odds with our family or our acquaintances.

On this father’s day, two days after the celebration of Juneteenth, which commemorates the final freeing of slaves from the state of Texas, we remember another great man who has said that sometimes we will be divided, but that does not justify taking up a sword literally. That man is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He and his movement for equal rights for all people made him take to the streets in protest with many others...but he always emphasized that they must be peaceful protests.

He too experienced division in his family; the family of Christian ministers who wrote to him as he sat in the jail in Birmingham. They asked him to back down from the protests and be patient. King responded that patience has not worked in the past to secure equal rights. Slaves had to demand their freedom, and people of color today continue to help the whole of society see and know that there are still injustices happening in our country. We take up cell phones instead of swords to record those injustices.

And we also read in the words of Jesus of that bedrock virtue; God’s lovingkindness. Do not be afraid. Do not fear. Even the hairs of your head are all counted by God. You are of more value than **many** sparrows.

As Jesus has asked of us all, I ask you today to lose your life to find it; Losing the way of selfishness, self-centeredness and self righteousness; Finding your life in generosity and lovingkindness to yourself and to others. We find our life in Christ.