

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
June 21, 2026 – The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Before considering this morning's reading from the Gospel, I want to speak about our lesson from the Old Testament book of Genesis. As usual, we need more information than we heard today. There is important background about the characters in this reading in earlier chapters of Genesis. Briefly, this is the story of Abraham up to today's reading.

God called a man named Abram (later re-named Abraham) to leave the land of his relatives and travel to a land that God would give him, the "Promised Land." God promised to bless Abram and his many descendants. Abram traveled with his wife Sarai (later re-named Sarah) to find the promised land. Sarai had no children. How was Abram to have descendants? Sarai had an Egyptian slave-girl named Hagar. Sarai told Abram to take Hagar as a wife who would bear children for him. He did, and when Hagar became pregnant, scripture tells us that "she looked with contempt on her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). Later in the story, God promised Abraham that Sarah would bear a son for him. Though they were old and Sarah was barren, Abraham trusted God's promise. She did bear a son who was named Isaac. The line of his descendants settled in Israel.

We heard what happened on the feast day when Isaac was weaned. Sarah wanted her son to be Abraham's heir, not Hagar's son. Sarah may have resented Hagar's earlier contempt of her. God allowed Sarah to send Hagar and her son into the wilderness to die. But God heard the cries of Hagar and the boy, and by a miracle God provided the water to keep them alive. Hagar's son was named Ishmael, which means "God hears." The line of his descendants settled in the Arabian Peninsula.

In pre-modern times the stories in Genesis were often read metaphorically or allegorically, not as literal truth. In modern times we are concerned about how to understand the stories. Are they literally or scientifically true? In the Episcopal Church most people do not think so. For example, must we look at the creation stories in Genesis as factual? Did God create everything in six days and rest on the seventh? Better to recognize this as an account which makes sense of how everything came into existence, an account that asserts that everything made by God is good. That's what matters. Creation is good, made by God.

And so, when we consider today's lesson, it isn't helpful to focus on why God apparently told Abraham that it was acceptable for Sarah to send Hagar and Ishmael away to die. Why would God do that? Better to think of this as an account of how God provided descendants to Abraham. God miraculously enabled Sarah to conceive and bear a son who will be the father of many descendants of Abraham. And God saved Ishmael, Abraham's first son born to Hagar, who will be the father of other descendants of Abraham. This then becomes a story of the lineages of the people blessed by God.

Now let's turn to today's reading from Matthew's Gospel. In chapter 10 we read an account of Jesus sending his twelve disciples out into the world to do what he had been doing – to cast out unclean spirits and to cure every disease and sickness. He gives them instructions about what to do and warns them that they will not always be well received. This morning's lesson continues his warnings.

Jesus' adversaries had called him "Beelzebul" (lord of the flies), a Canaanite god and ruler of demons. Since people accused Jesus of being demonic, the disciples of Jesus can expect no less. The disciples will face persecution on account of Jesus. In strong language he exhorts them to remain faithful: "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven." He reminds the disciples that nothing human beings can do to them need shake their trust in God because God values them.

We need to read the next portion of the Gospel passage carefully. Why does Jesus say that he has not come to the earth "to bring peace, but a sword?" Understood in the context of his warnings to the disciples, he is telling them that living according to his teaching will sometimes result in separation between people with even the closest ties to one another – son and father, daughter and mother, and so on. "One's foes will be members of one's own household." The followers of Jesus might be persecuted even by people formerly attached by ties of duty and love. This is less what Jesus intended than what might be a consequence of living in his footsteps.

Perhaps you have had such an experience with your family or friends. Admittedly, compared to persecution, this is a trivial example from my life, but the idea is similar. I had close friends I had known years before my return to Christian faith and church in my mid-20's. When it became very clear that my faith and my involvement in church were central to my life, a separation between us grew. This couple thought that my beliefs were absurd and that the decisions I made to volunteer or give money to help others were stupid. Even after I did healing prayer in the name of Christ for the man's chronic back pain – which he admitted helped him very much – the divide remained and cooled a friendship that eventually dissolved.

In the final paragraph of this morning's lesson, Jesus cautions his disciples to put their love of him before all other loves. Not to stop loving family, but to keep God's way as revealed in Jesus firmly in first place. Jesus has warned the disciples that they may be persecuted for their faith. He tells them to be faithful regardless of persecution and to "take up the cross" – risk suffering and death – to follow him. This is because of a paradox of faith: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Jesus' teaching is "upside down" with respect to the ways of the world. Put faith first, though it may mean suffering and death, and you will find true life. Put the life of self and worldly values first, and you will lose the life that might have been yours if you had followed Jesus and lived according to God's way of love.

For us, to follow Jesus does not mean risking violent persecution. The demands of faith are more subtle, less dramatic. But we do face choices in life when we decide for God or for the world, for self or for others, for love or for something less than love. What can help us make good choices? Perhaps what Jesus told the Twelve will support us. Take to heart two truths: remember how God values you, and it is by choosing to follow Jesus that we find true life.

This morning before we receive the gift of Holy Communion we will sing these words: "O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee, that where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be; and Jesus I have promised to serve thee to the end; O give me grace to follow, my Master and my friend." So may it be. In Jesus' name. Amen.