Sermon on Proper 12 Year A 2017
(Genesis 21:8-21 (with a brief look at Matthew 10:24-39 and an even briefer glance at Romans 6)

It’s an amazing event, as our text puts it, a great feast; Isaac, the child of promise, the child that Abraham and Sarah have waited for through an impossible passage of years has just been weaned!

He’s now a bouncing toddler; he’s made it through the treacherous shoals of infanthood and early childhood unscathed; a minor miracle in the ancient world.

So a feast is in order, a joyous occasion in which family, servants and even slaves take time off work, at least after all the food is prepared!

As if to reinforce the joy of the occasion, the Hebrew Scriptures do something they don’t often do, they show us a glimpse of unvarnished personality, the elder son of Abraham, Ishmael playing with the little toddler Isaac.

You’ll recall that at an earlier stage of Abraham and Sarah’s journey as they wrestled with God’s direction and promises, Sarah, in childless exasperation had convinced Abraham to try and have a son with Hagar her trusted slave.

God helps those who help themselves, she thought. Not a wrong inclination, not a rash gamble or deliberate flaunting of what God had said. God had been quite vague, actually, as to how the promise of a son would come and after many, many years, Sarah had rationally concluded that she was not to be the source of said child.

The experiment had worked; Hagar had given birth to Ishmael whom both Sarah and Abraham took as their own son, an adoption, the child of promise!

But the Divine intelligence had other ideas, the promise was supposed to come through Sarah. God had called both Abraham and Sarah! Here was a reaffirmation of the original equality of man and woman that we see in the Creation story.

Of course, one might say, there’s already a woman in the picture, Hagar! Yes there is, and in an amazing move, God manages in this story, to affirm both, even though one acts below her dignity!

Back to our scene; Ishmael, now a young teenager, might well have felt defensive at this great feast. It wasn’t for him; where did he fit now that Isaac was born?

But instead of sulking, instead of trying to manipulate his parents he joins in the festivities; *playing* with the *new* child of promise.

If Ishmael’s okay with Isaac being the new centre of attention; if he’s that emotionally mature then surely this blended family will work, right? No! In a move of shocking cruelty the up-till-now longsuffering and faithful Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be tossed out of the clan.

This is a death sentence; Abraham and Sarah are the only source of her provision; outside of the clan, as is clearly demonstrated when she does in fact leave, there is only wilderness, starvation and death.

In the midst of celebration, the reality of an underlying dynamic at work in many human relationships rears its ugly head.

We wonder, what is it that would cause Sarah to act the way she did; had she not just experienced the fulfillment of prayer, the joy of God’s faithfulness in her life?

Yes she had, but here’s the thing, and it’s a weird thing: human beings, Sarah, you and I are often provoked to envy and covetousness by good things! By the blessing given to another; by the gracious character qualities that another possesses;

even as we receive something good we can believe that we don’t really measure up; that the person beside us is *more* blessed, that their blessing somehow takes away from ours.

If Ishmael had gone off in a corner and sulked and said, “well I guess you guys don’t love me anymore” chances are that Sarah would have come after him saying “that’s crazy, of course we love you, of course you’ve got a place in our clan.”

She would have known how to relate to that kind of sibling rivalry because it’s typically human, each of us looking out for #1, each of us fearfully, protectively carving out a slice of space of safety for ourselves.

But instead Ishmael exhibits regard for the other, a self-forgetfulness, a basic trust that he’s not been forgotten and it is precisely these qualities that stir Sarah into an envious rage.

She gives in to her fears: Ishmael has developed into such a fine young man; he’s Abraham’s first-born, but not of *her* womb; what space will there be for Isaac in Abraham’s heart? Abraham is old, chances are Ishmael will be just the age to assume leadership of the clan when Abraham dies and Isaac won’t yet have the age and skill to defend himself.

Though an ancient text and tale there is absolutely no need for cultural translation; we all know what’s going on here!

It is precisely Ishmael’s non-reactive graciousness, his love of neighbour that has opened the door for Sarah’s sin!

In Jewish theology the 1st and the 10th commandment are the bookend commands that made sense of the 10commandments and the Law as a whole: “You shall have no other gods but God” and “You shall not covet.”

This 10th command was the capstone of the law, the root sin that led to dishonouring of parents, killing, lying, stealing and adultery.

Envy, the emotion of desiring the attractive possessions or qualities that someone else has and we don’t is according to the philosopher Bertrand Russell not only one of the most potent causes of unhappiness it is also the leading cause of the world’s problems, most of which come from broken relationships.

Our world, its economies, its tensions and its wars are largely explained by envy. Most problems in families, in marriages, in churches can be, in the final analysis attributed to envy and coveting. It is *the* human disease.

Philosophers tell us that there is no cure; the disease is a function of our intellectual and emotional development; because we are self-conscious we have the capacity to compare ourselves to others and therefore notice that others have more security, more possessions, more advantages than I do.

Psychotherapy offers no cure either, just coping mechanisms, either find ways to avoid it through isolation or admit that you’re suffering from it and at least control its worst excesses.

World Politics offers alliances, sanctions and the United Nations as it’s own large-scale coping mechanism, but again, promises no cure.

But astoundingly the Church, because of God’s work in God’s people, prefigured here in Ishmael, does!

When God works in and through us we discover that God shows no favoritism to either Ishmael or Isaac, to Sarah or Hagar, to Muslims, Christians, Buddhists or Hindus, to those with money and those without, to the pretty or the homely, to men or women, the aged or the young.

God’s Love simply comes to everyone, it is the universal gift of a cure offered to our universal disease!

Notice how the cure operates precisely under the conditions of envy; God doesn’t avoid our disease!

Indeed, God’s counsel to Abraham is extraordinary. Listen to your wife and allow the envy to take its course! Don’t try to shortcut sin’s poison! Again, God is reinforcing Sarah’s part in this great drama, the equality of men and women if you will, but there’s more going on than that.

It’s only when we’ve allowed people to make their choices, whether from envy, fear or faith that God gently presents to us a different way; an opening to the possibility that our narrow perspective may not be God’s perspective.

The good news is that God doesn’t judge and punish Sarah for her cruelty because if God did we’d probably all be judged and punished; the good news is that God provides for Hagar and Ishmael because chances are we’ve all been treated unfairly and come out on the short end of a relationship when we thought we had done our best.

The Good News is that God sees all of this and doesn’t give up on any of us, indeed provides for us as we call out for provision and aid. There is more to the wilderness, Hagar and Ishmael’s and ours than starvation and death; There is more to your wilderness than suffering! There is God!

Already we see in this story that though each person has a different call, one is not loved more than the other. God creates meaning for both Isaac and his wife Rebekah as the Father and Mother of Judeo/Christian civilization and Ishmael and his unnamed wife as the Father and Mother of Islamic societies.

But of course we need more than stories for our foundational way of relating to change, even stories about God! We need God to show up and show us what it would be like and so, to briefly refer to our Gospel reading, in Christ, in the Gospel God brings a sword to all our ways of relating that are rooted in envy and coping mechanisms that keep a kind of pseudo-peace.

The reason that Christ couldn’t be accepted in his day was precisely the reason that Sarah couldn’t accept Ishmael, he had something that threatened the binary code: the code that said “Gentiles were out, Jews were in; there were those within the nation who were loved and those who were forsaken;”

Christ broke the rules; he played with everyone, especially those he was supposed have a rivalry with on the one hand the leaders on the one hand, and the “poor sinners,” whom he was supposed to shun, on the other hand!

Rather than accepting his work as God’s gift, a correction, a leveling of the playing field, most religious leaders were threatened by his insights.

Sadly, many religious leaders today still are! But when a community of faith begins to act like Ishmael we reflect Christ’s teaching: this is what it means to take up our cross; this is participating in God’s Mission by the Spirit!

It is called “taking up our cross” because breaking the habits of the millennia is the most difficult thing and yet most necessary thing humans and their communities can every do!

If we’ll dare to trust Christ’s power and break free from envy we will be free of the one pattern that almost more than any other leads us to lose our life.

 If we follow Christ wherever he may lead we will find that though we have many troubles, even with those we call brother and sister, mother and father, that we will, after possibly many false starts, be truly alive!