

Come, Holy Spirit, and makes these words Your Word to us. Amen.

I strongly believe that joy should be the most visible marker of our life in Christ,
and of our worship. Jesus said it was to be love; I’m adding joy.

Boy, it is hard to find the joy in our readings this morning.

I think about Abbott and Costello’s classic routine *Who’s on First*, about a team of
strangely named ballplayers – Who, What, I Don’t Know, Why, Tomorrow, Today...

Sometimes understanding these ancient stories, and Jesus’ teachings,
which have come down to us through 2,000 years of translators and interpreters,
can feel like that classic of miscommunication.

Who’s on first? What’s on Second, I Don’t Know’s on Third...and when his teachings
are this hard to understand, maybe we’re with the shortstop, I Don’t Care.

Jesus talking tough in this “Training Day” teaching to his disciples.

Where’s that nice, gentle, loving Jesus? The Prince of Peace?

Why is Jesus talking about swords? And what does he have against mothers-in-law?

Well, he’s just quoting the prophet Micah on the in-law part.

But what about that sword? If Jesus didn’t come to bring peace, why are we here?

Statistics show the majority of churchgoers go to church to find tranquility.

We don’t need any more conflict or violence, do we?

Yet look at this story right in our sacred scriptures,

of vengefulness and violence within Abraham’s own family.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael rings especially loud this year, as Black Lives Matter
demonstrations fill our streets and more Americans seem finally to recognize
the urgency of dealing with the legacy of racism that continues to blemish all of us.

Hagar’s story is the original *Handmaid’s Tale*. Remember, God had promised

Abram his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky –
but Abram and Sarai were unable to conceive a child.

The law provided that a woman could take as her own a child borne by her slave,
so Sarah, in her obsession with having a child, arranged for Abraham to
impregnate Hagar, the Egyptian slave. The boy born to Hagar was named

Ishmael, and Abraham loved him very much. He considered him his firstborn.

Fast forward a few years, and three angels show up at Abraham and Sarah’s home
and announce she will bear a child. At her age and barren? Sarah laughs.

However, she becomes pregnant, and against all odds bears a son, named Isaac.

Today's story begins the day Isaac is weaned. Not content that she has gotten everything she always wanted, her own son, flesh of her flesh; watching the two boys play together, Sarah is resentful of the child she forced her foreign slave girl to bear. She wants them both gone. Abraham is reluctant – he loves Ishmael. God gives assurance he has a plan, and he sends them off into the desert with a skin of water. God had a plan. That does not mean there wasn't rampant sin in Sarah's move – God works with us.

Hagar and Ishmael survive till the water gives out, and then she puts him under a bush and goes far enough away that she doesn't have to watch him die. How many mothers in the world today do you think have to make similar choices? Mothers sending their children away starving in drought-stricken African lands?

Mothers fleeing drug violence in Central America?

Mothers selling themselves to feed their children?

Mothers trying to protect their sons from gun violence in our cities?

This girl has been taken from her people and country, enslaved, forced to have a child with her master. How much more suffering must she endure?

But an angel speaks to her words of assurance – God has a plan for her son, to make a great nation of him as he will make a great nation of Isaac.

Our Muslim sisters and brothers claim Ishmael as their patriarch.

Then God opens Hagar's eye to see a well that was there all along. They will live!

Friends, there are a lot of Hagar's and Ismael's in our communities – and guess what? We are the wells of water God has placed around them.

We know wells of Living Water that will mean they never have to thirst again. We are the agents of justice and peace who are to leap into action whenever we see someone suffering – hungry or thirsty, or cast out because of the color of their skin, or their ethnicity, or poverty, or the circumstances of their birth. We cannot rest as long as one child in America feels unsafe on our streets because of his skin color or facial features; as long as one woman or man does not get a job interview because of the "strangeness" of their name, hello Hagar, hello Ishmael...as long as one family is denied a mortgage to live in a safe neighborhood. We need to be fierce advocates, and become aware when we are holding tight the privileges those of us who happen to have white skin take for granted – inherited wealth, easy access to capital, social networks that promote us. The Way of Jesus is the Way of Love, and the Way of Love is the way of justice.

That's why Jesus was so tough with his disciples – he knew they'd get into trouble. Jesus was not saying he came to bring conflict. He said conflict would be an inevitable consequence of his mission, of following him. Jesus came to stand up to the evils of this world, injustice and racism and corruption and complacency. That doesn't make your life peaceful. Ask Mahatma Gandhi; ask Martin Luther King, Jr., to name two obvious examples. Jesus did not advocate violence – but he did talk about bringing a sword. Look at how the word “sword” is used in the New Testament: The Sword of the Spirit is one of the defensive weapons we take up against the devil. In Hebrews we read that the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, *“...dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow ...”* That is surgically sharp!

The sword Jesus talks about is a sword of distinction, that distinguishes good and evil, what will bless us and make us effective as disciples, from what will harm us and make us complacent and weak. Jesus does divide people sometimes. He claims our fidelity over all other claims. The priorities of this world – family, wealth, convenience, distraction – do not make us effective disciples. Jesus is just calling it, so we're clear. Jesus came not to bring peace but reality.

I'm sorry so many people think church is about comfort – that's not the Way of Jesus as we find it in the New Testament. Jesus did not come to make us more comfortable – Jesus came to draw us closer to God. He clearly redefined family; saying it is not our blood kin, it is those who follow him – and he said loving God comes first, no matter what.

When we love God, we love those whom God has made. All of them.

“Losing our life” doesn't usually mean literally losing our lives – it means loosening our grip on all the things that have priority in our lives – our children, our things; we allow God to reshuffle our priorities. We can become agents for racial justice and economic equity. We can reject the culture of materialism and affluence which threatens to unravel us. We can choose to direct our time and attention toward the things of God. Will that please the people in our lives? Not necessarily. Drawing closer to God puts our loyalties at risk, and guess what? That creates conflict. We get out there actually advocating for racial justice, saying it's not okay to take black lives like they don't matter – someone in our family or circle may get mad.

Jesus is just being straight with those who would be his disciples:
if you follow me, and you start making some different choices,
it's going to shake up some of the people close to you.

Who's on First in your life?

If it's Jesus, the rest of the infield – and the outfield – will fall into place. *Amen.*

Matthew 10:24-39

'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

'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.

'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.