

Grace for Hagar, Grace for Muslims, Grace for Us

by J. R. Luck, Jr at Peace UCC on June 26, 2011

Unless you've been in a coma for most of the last decade, you are aware that a lot of people have a lot of opinions about the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque." Park 51 or the Cordoba House project is a planned 13 story Muslim community center that is based on the idea of the Y as well as the Jewish Cultural Center on 92nd street in NYC. Most of the space would be open to the public including the 500-seat auditorium, theater, performing arts center, fitness center, swimming pool, basketball court, childcare area, bookstore, culinary school, art studio, food court, as well as a memorial to the victims of the 9-11 attacks. In addition there would be prayer space to accommodate between 1000-2000 Muslims.

Now long before 9-11, Muslims had a presence in lower Manhattan with 2 mosques near Ground Zero: one in Tribeca and the other two blocks north of Ground Zero at 45-47 Park Place with approximately 450 Muslims worshipping there. That building was destroyed in the 9-11 attack. In addition, there were multiple Muslim prayer spaces in the World Trade Centers themselves. Perhaps that is why the early response to this project was not very pronounced. However, after a campaign by conservative bloggers and founders of the group [Stop Islamization of America](#) national histrionics ensued.

So, what's my opinion about all of this? I'm glad you asked. I think that it's time to read Genesis. Once upon a time God promised Abraham children and despite my progressive ways, this is one time that its important to note that God made a covenant only with Abraham and not Sarah. However, even when he was pushing 100, there were still no children much less a great nation. Now in that day and age kids were social security and desperate times call for desperate measures. And so there came a day when Sarah told Abraham that since she could not give him a child, he could have a child with her slave Hagar. Abraham did as he was told and Hagar conceived a child who would be named Ishmael.

If you haven't already guessed, things got a tad complicated between Hagar and Sarah. Soon Hagar was looking with contempt on her mistress, and... well let's just say that Sarah wasn't dealing well with the reality that her slave was carrying her husband's child, even if she had originally blessed the idea. But then, as so often happens in families, things got even more complicated: miracle of miracles, Sarah conceived a child and Isaac was born.

Now on the day when Isaac was weaned, Abraham threw a big party and things were good, at least until Sarah saw her son playing with *that* woman's son. I don't know what happened at that moment. Maybe it hit her that there were two legitimate heirs, not one. Maybe looking at her 100 plus year old husband, it occurred to her that when something happened to Abraham, Hagar and/or Ishmael might decide to turn the tables on her. And yes, God had promised to Abraham that a great nation would come from his lineage, but which line? Would the great nation come from Hagar's son or from Sarah's?

When an individual, or for that matter even a nation is anxious, the part of our brain that is called the reptilian brain goes into overdrive. The good news about this part of the brain is that it's fast, which, if you're being chased by a sabertooth tiger, is really handy. The bad news is that the reptilian brain only has about 4 options to choose from: 1) Can I kill it? 2) If so, can I eat it? 3) If not, can I run from it? and 4) Can I mate with it? Sarah, in what is hardly her finest hour, answers affirmatively to question #1: yes, I can kill it. So she turns to Abraham and says, "The son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." Then she gives Abraham instructions to banish her to the desert, which is the equivalent of murder. Not exactly Sarah's finest hour.

So after some reassurance from the Almighty that things were going to work out, Abraham sends out Hagar and her child into the desert with a few supplies. But supplies run out. What now? They were slaves; they had no people, no resources, no family, no nothing. And so it was with great sorrow that Hagar placed her son under a bush so that she wouldn't have to watch him die. She then walks far enough away that she won't be able to hear his cries over hers.

But there was another who did hear. It is worth noting that the name Ishmael means "God hears." And so it was that a messenger of God is sent to Hagar saying: "Do not be afraid for God has heard the

voice of the boy where he is." She then is instructed to pick him up because God is going to make a great nation from him. And as she does so, God opens her eyes to a well in her midst, and she gives him a drink. The story then ends as it tells us that God was with this boy as he grew up.

I've spent a bit of time today, retelling this story because it is not a story that we are overly familiar with. However, it should be for a couple of good reasons. One, this story, and all of the stories we will be reading this summer from Genesis speak to the wonders and to the horrors of family life. Do any of you know anything about family conflicts? Do any of your families know anything about jealousy or fear? If so, then pay attention next month to Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Leah and Rachel and Joseph. Trust me. Your family's problems are minor compared to what this clan goes through.

Second, I can't help but wonder whether this story is a little reminder from God to pay attention to some of the ignored parts of our family tree. Here in this dramatic Genesis saga, we are given the story of Israel and thus we are given the story of the church. But... But here amidst our story, there's this wonderful little reminder that, while our story is dependent on God, God is not limited to our story. You see God wrote another story with another blessing for another people. And that's son's name is Ishmael. Folks, **OUR** scripture, which we affirm as the Word of God, says that God would make a great nation from Ishmael. The Bible is talking about Islam because Ishmael is the forefather of all Muslims, and his story my friends, hasn't been heard nearly enough in the last ten years. Since that fateful day of 9-11, our reptilian brains have been in overdrive, and our anxiety and fear have led us to act more like our great grandmother Sarah and less and less like our heavenly Father.

So please hear me. I'm not saying that Ishmael's story as found in the Qur'an needs to be affirmed. I am saying that we as Christians need to affirm his story in our Scripture. Here are two individuals - Hagar and Ishmael - and their only family has cast them out to die. And yet there in the desert they - and we - discover that they are part of the family of God. Like it or not, these verses offer a biblical criticism of any theology or, for that matter, any political rhetoric founded in nationalism or exclusivity. This story is a story of grace for Hagar which means that it is a story of grace for all of her great grandchildren.

So again please hear me: these passages never deny God's promises and self-revelation through the family of Abraham and Sarah. **BUT** it does affirm that God is a God of grace who reaches out to family members we would rather not invite to the family reunion. And let's face it. Whether its our theological family, or our family of origins, we all have family members we'd rather not acknowledge.

Today in Israel and Palestine, so much of what is happening there is based on two faiths - Judaism and Islam - sanctioning their actions on the divine promise made to them. The awful and sad irony is that the individual to receive that promise is Abraham, the great, great grandfather of both faiths. Some 4,000 years later Abraham's wives and sons are still fighting about who's going to get Abraham's inheritance. I wonder, what would happen on the West Bank, the Golan Heights and in Jerusalem, if this story of Hagar were remembered and re-embodied and taught?

This story, however, isn't simply for those living in the Middle East or in New York City. We in the church also fear tomorrow. And we in the church have also been known to banish people from our midst because of a teenage pregnancy or because of a divorce. At my mother-in-law's former church there have been some problems because they only want the "right" kind of youth in their youth group. So pray tell me what exactly is the "right" kind of youth?

In the gospel lesson today, Jesus has some rather harsh words to say about family. And its a good thing he never ran for president with this platform on family values because he would have never received either the Democratic or Republican nomination. But Jesus isn't concerned about running for President. He's concerned with creating a new understanding of family. He's concerned with redefining what it means to be a brother and sister. He's concerned with creating a new covenant.

So what do I think about the Park 51 Cordoba project? I think God embraces all of our brothers and sisters, even those we think are an embarrassment to the family. I think those we call enemies, the Bible calls children of the heavenly Father. I think the Bible teaches us that God keeps the covenant. I think we actually ought to read the Bible and not just beat people with it. Especially Genesis 21. O God save us from ourselves and our arrogance and preserve us in Christ's name and through his grace. Amen.