

Does your family have any little secrets? Secrets that are in your family that your family has chosen to try to hide from the world around you? The reality is that all of our families have secrets. And especially here in the South we who are native Southerners have been trained how to keep family secrets, family secrets.

Some secrets are embarrassing because they are funny. Do you really need to tell people that your Dad dressed up as a woman when he was in middle school and won a beauty pageant? I don't think my kids want others to know that story. Oops. I guess you now do.

But other family secrets are not so funny. You don't tell the story to others about your uncle that was caught having an affair. You hide the information about how your cousin embezzled a bunch of money. You don't mention that your father participated in some abusive behaviors. You don't share with others that your sister is able to live an extravagant lifestyle because she "borrows" money from your aging parents.

Some of us work very hard trying to keep our family secrets, family secrets. Shhhh. Don't tell anyone about that story. It would embarrass our family. Every family has a story that you don't tell.

Christians and Jews have a family secret. It's a story in our past that we don't like to tell people about. It's the dirty little secret about Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael. We don't talk about Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael. We only talk about Abraham and Sarah and Isaac. The story of Ishmael is our faith's dirty little secret.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we read that God promises to Abraham that he will be the father to a great nation. But there is just one problem. Abraham and his wife Sarah are very old people. Sarah is past childbearing age.

So Sarah assumes that the only way that God can fulfill this promise is if Abraham fathers a child through another woman. So Sarah offers up her maid Hagar. And Hagar becomes pregnant and gives birth to her son Ishmael.

But as soon as Ishmael is born, Sarah becomes very jealous of Hagar and Ishmael. Because Hagar can provide Abraham something that she could not. And so Sarah, who would be the mother to a great nation which is cared for by God, abuses Hagar and forces her to run away. But it is by a spring of water where an angel of the Lord finds Hagar. This angel promises Hagar that she has not been forgotten. That even though God's people will not take care of her, God will take care of her.

Read Genesis 21: 8-21

In the passage which we read this morning from Genesis, Sarah continues to show contempt for Hagar and her son Ishmael. To the point that Sarah forbids her son Isaac from playing with Ishmael and demands that Hagar and Ishmael be banished from the community. That's what we do a lot of times with our secrets. Not only do we cover them up but we abuse the innocent victims because we want to cover it all up.

And once again, God intervenes on the behalf of Hagar and Ishmael. Even though his presence is embarrassing to Abraham and Sarah and, therefore to God, God does not forsake this family. God instructs Abraham to provide the necessary food and water for Hagar and Ishmael to survive.

But Hagar has given up hope. She runs out of food and water and tosses the child away. She leaves him in the desert hoping that he will eventually die and remove this burden from her life. But that is not God's will. God hears the cry of Ishmael and comforts Hagar. Do not be afraid, Hagar is told. And God once again provides a pool of water. Hagar and Ishmael. The embarrassing ones in the family are provided the water to survive. God's people did not come to their aid. God came to their aid.

The young people who have been in Vacation Bible School have been learning about water. Yesterday, they heard a story from the Old Testament book of Kings about the healing of Naaman in the waters of the river. Naaman, a man who thought he was too good for others but learned that he had to humble himself to receive God's blessing.

The young people have heard about how important fresh water is in our world today. About how almost half of the people of the world do not have access to clean drinking water. And that only 1/10th of one percent of all of the water in the world is available fresh water and how important it is for us to take good care of the water and do what we can to be fairer in how we distribute water. They are learning that we Christians are to work for a world where everyone has access to clean water and not just the ones who have resources to buy it or divert it their way.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael challenge us today in how we treat people whom the world says are "unimportant." That healing and resources to health and wholeness is not just reserved for those who have means.

I recently read someone reflecting on her experience working one summer as a chaplain with leukemia patients. This chaplain was sitting at the bedside of a woman with a complicated medical history who had been significantly obese for most of her life and defined by the disease of leukemia. The patient confided in the chaplain about how she was ostracized and judged by a culture that craves skinny and fit. She shared about her failed efforts at dieting and choosing gastric bypass surgery but then other complications arose.

When she was diagnosed with leukemia, her doctors looked at her medical history and told her that there were only a few things they could try. They would take a conservative treatment to buy her some time but they were unwilling to consider any advanced therapies. She left the appointment in shock, feeling defeated, hopeless, and more than anything, judged.

Like Hagar, she felt stripped of worth. She prayed, and she cried from the depths of her soul, and she found a faith that told her that her life was still worth something. And so she picked up a pen, reached out in faith, wrote her doctor. This is what she wrote.

“Dear doctor. If you’re going to treat me, you need to know who I am. I am more than what you see in my medical history. I am more than my blood tests and my diagnosis. I am a wife and a mother who wants to see her daughter grow up. I am a volunteer court advocate for foster children, and there is a teenage girl who is counting on me. I am a woman of faith. And I have more life left to live. I thought you needed to know. Sincerely, Linda.

Linda says at her next appointment, there was an immediate change in her doctor’s approach. He thanked her for her letter and was willing to discuss options for treatment. Her cure wasn’t instant, but her healing was. The relationship was restored and he could see her as more than her disease. Her faith cleared a path toward life and recovery.

Linda read the Bible and read stories about how God provides water and love and support to the people that others don’t care about. By reading these stories about people like Hagar, Ishmael, and Naaman, Linda learned that she was of value as well. She learned through her faith that she was much more than a disease on a medical chart. She learned that she was a child of God.

This week I challenge you to look closely into the eyes of people that our society, including fellow Christians, say are unimportant. Look into the eyes of the immigrant and try to look at them in the way that God looks at them, not the way you may want to look at them. Look into the eyes of the morbidly obese person not the way others view them but through the eyes of God. Look into the eyes of the person who collects the garbage or tends the yard or walks the street behind a cart not the way the society sees them but through the eyes of God.

Look into the eyes of the person who is thirsty for clean water not as a person with little political power but in the way that God views them.

We have read a story about how God cares for the Ishmaels and Hagers of the world and provides them water.

How are we treating the Hagers and the Ishmaels of the world and in our own family?

Do we see them as disposable or do we see them as children of God deserving of wholeness and healing? AMEN.

-Owen, Katie, "Reaching Out in Faith," Vantage, Columbia Theological Alumni magazine, Summer 2011.

-Text: Genesis 21: 14-19

-Given: July 24, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)