

INTERTWINED
Genesis 21 and Matthew 10: 24
June 21, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

John and Joanna McAdams lived in the same home near downtown for 33 years. They had raised two children there and still had a teen living at home. They both had low-wage jobs, and while it provided for steady income, they were grateful for the inner-city services that helped them supplement when money got tight. Unable to afford a car, they could walk most places and grab the bus to others. The downtown food market sold groceries on a sliding income scale and on those occasions when end-of-the-month money was tight, they gave thanks for clean, family-friendly shelter where they could share a meal with others. The health clinic nearby would, from time to time, offer services such as a wellness check, some dental care, small packets of non-prescription medicines like Tylenol or Advil. Every now and then, hygiene kits with things like toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, and deodorant would be given and it was always a blessing.

They could walk to church where Joanna could usually be found in the kitchen cooking meals for those who had no other means for a hot meal. John was grateful for a group of men who had taken him under their wings and offered advice about budgeting or putting money back for a rainy-day fund.

But the neighborhood had been changing for a while. People were moving to the suburbs, out of the shadows of the high buildings and high-dollar rent. Oh so wishing to settle into a slower pace than the concrete city offered, they were willing to sell their homes for what the buyers offered. In this particular case, in downtown Austin, the new property owners would raise the rent, do some maintenance, but not enough to render a “forever” home for anyone. Pretty soon Joanna said, these homes became revolving doors for people who could pay rent for a while and when the money ran out, moving day began. Too often, the McAdams told us, the new address became a homeless shelter, a pay-by-the-day room or a box by a building.

Diners, marketplaces, laundry mats, Mom and Pop, family-style business were feeling the effects of change, too. Gone were the people who could, at one time, afford their services. As rental homes were on the rise, so too were the *For Sale* signs in the windows of the neighborhood stores. The McAdams told us they moved to southwest Austin because it was increasingly hard to maintain the kind of good family life they had provided for their other children and they were not willing to risk that for their youngest. Their long-time friends were moving, and add to that, the once quiet streets were becoming more littered and loud. Tension, worry, and stress had begun to manifest itself in anger, drug deals, and violence.

All of this happened over the course of a few years. And as we all know, as time marches on, change continues to spring up.

John and Joanna were out of the inner city because of that cycle. They waited it out just long enough that, when people wanted to leave the suburbs and come back to the city, they were able to sell their house, not for much, but, at least they could start over somewhere safer, they hoped.

It seems that the “burbs” were not quite what some thought they were be. Coming to work in downtown often meant hours in commute, leaving less to do what they had hoped to do...spend quality time in green spaces.

Because of their son, and the fact that many of the local services, and the Mom and Pop business had closed the doors, the McAdams found themselves headed to help More often than they wanted. And so, I met them through the *Family Promise* ministry that Shepherd of the Hills Presbyterian Church helped sponsor with multiple other churches.

The McAdams entered the program as they continued to work and save money to get on their feet, and eventually they did. One night while volunteering, this whole story spilled out. There was no anger, no blame, just a story told about real people and real life. John would later tell us how grateful he was that his son managed to escape peer and gang pressure, and while his self-esteem suffered because he lost everything familiar to him...was still a good young man. The family gone. The home gone. Life as the McAdams knew it...gone. But, amazingly they believed their story was not a devastating as many in the old neighborhood.

Such a cast of characters, and yet, their lives were intertwined. Then, and I believe more now than ever, what we do and how we act and treat one another has affects far beyond any of us ever imagined. This is from me, agree or disagree, that is fine. But, my story is your story. And your story is mine. God created all that was, gave us life and said, be good stewards. Take care of all these blessings, creation and creature.

We live in connection one with another, and I am so grateful that my story, and your story are ultimately God’s story, and while I do not know the world’s ending to drama called life; I know where my final story ends. Back home with the one who me life.

In the moment of time we call life on earth, God calls us the goodness with which we have been blessed. God is not asking us to turn away or deny blessings of life. I am pretty sure God has a healthy supply of blessings. But part of being connected, caring for each other is our willingness to share our goodness and our blessings, and not wait around because God has a stockpile.

The stewardship of sharing binds us together in God’s story for our lives. This kind of stewardship is meant to break down barriers, to put our fires of hatred, and, out of the love born within us, live God’s justice and kindness and mercy.

God is the author of the story of Abram, Sarai, Isaac, Hagar and Ishmael, and God is the one writing the stories of our lives and deaths and lives beyond death. Pause. **But** is not that

ancient story the one credited with the dividing line of hatred and animosity between the Abrahamic faiths?

Yes. But the truth of scripture tells us that God is love. God has written our story, but...we can choose which acts and which words we live. It is true that we can't ignore the extreme and violent hijacking of faith and beliefs that seek to divide us, but if we have listened to Hagar's story, we hear the same promise that God gave Abraham...I will greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for the multitude.

Hagar, whose name means other or stranger-- in humility, gratitude gives God a name..."The God Who Sees." No doubt that some of us see Hagar as the outsider, the outcast, the "other" woman, and yet, God draws close to her, seeks out a relationship. While Sarai, the leading lady of the story treats Hagar with contempt, God is tender toward her, watches over her and Ishmael and intervenes when she needs protection. Hagar's story...the story of the "other" is planted right in the middle of Abram's and Sarai's story and as "unsettling" as it may, in God's eyes Hagar and Ishmael deserve the same blessing as all of God's children.

I think it is not only fair, but faithful to say that if we are hearing of the stories of scripture and they engender in any way hatred or prejudice or judgment or if our hearts are "hardened" against the stranger, the other, we are reading God's story all wrong. While it is, at least for me, unsettling, to think that I have been guilty of looking at people who are "different" from me...different in all kinds of ways, I have the choice to do better, because God says, I am better than that and so too are we are.

We were all created in the image of God. It is too easy to put ourselves in different categories and find distain because of the differences. God said, is saying and will continue to say, do not do that. Instead, work together to find solutions that bring about justice and peace and hope for everyone. That is the story I have written for all.

After Sarah's death, Abraham married again. Her name is Keturah. Some biblical scholars say Keturah was actually Hagar, just with a name change. Others say not so. True or not, the descendants of Abraham continue to come and the story of God's faith and hope lives on. **God** provides the way for a peaceful solution to a warring problem. But Abraham and Hagar, and us, have to listen and live out God's way; reconciliation is the work to which Jesus and we are called.

Feed the hungry, yes. But more than that, work together in ways that help them feed themselves. Provide shelter, yes. But more than that, work together so they can afford the shelter they already have. Enjoy the blessings that we have, yes. But more than that, share those blessings so that we live not our stories, but live out the story of the one who created us in love, spoke and lived that love in Jesus Christ and commanded us to love one another with that same kind of love.

From a God of promises, who calls us to live our intertwined story, and sent us a role model of how to live, we hear: do not be afraid, each of you is valued for who you are. Do not let Beelzebul or any evil tell you that you are not worthy, unvalued so much that anger or division are created, and worse-case scenario, our souls disconnected from God. Jesus says that that can happen.

But it does not have to because God will never disconnect from us. You, Jesus says, matter to your creator. And you. And you. And you. Every single one of us and every single hair on our head is known and loved by God. And Jesus also says that how we choose to live out God's love story is up to us. Because God gives us loving freedom, even in this unimaginable love story, there is discomfort.

Those who know and share God's story and God's story in Jesus Christ, will be acknowledged in heaven. Those who do not live the life of stewardship in its purest form...care for one another...will not be acknowledged by the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Hager and Ishmael.

Folks, God, in Jesus, has given us the ending of our earthly stories. I pray we choose to live out that story in thanksgiving for God's great story created just for us. Amen.