

Proper 7A 2023
Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86; Matthew 10:24-39
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This morning's readings are not happy ones, but they offer some very practical lessons on importance of clarity about what we are doing and why, about keeping the main things the main things. When we aren't focused on what God is calling us to do, things can get pretty bad.

In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah's decision to try to accomplish God's work on their own by having a child with their slave is turning out about as you probably expect. Sarah, protecting her son Isaac from threats imagined and potentially real, has her slave Hagar and Hagar's son Ishmael cast out. Two things happen as a result. First, and possibly most importantly, God does not abandon Hagar and Ishmael. Just because they are on the wrong side of the quote-unquote important figures of salvation history does not mean that God forgets them. God not only miraculously provides water that they need in the desert wilderness, but also ensures that Ishmael grows up to be a talented, successful person.

The other result is that the consequences of Sarah and Abraham's decisions result in conflict and strife that continues to this day between the Jewish people who trace their lineage through Isaac and the Arab, Muslim peoples that see themselves as heirs to God's promise through Ishmael. Sarah and Abraham's bad decision continues to plague us to this day.

Similar issues crop up in our Gospel, where Jesus is telling his disciples to keep their focus on him. He recognizes that this focus is not going to be easy. People will malign them, or worse, and even people they love will reject them and push them out. In all of this, Jesus says, "have no fear of them... even the hairs of your head are all counted." Keep doing what I have given you to do, Jesus tells us, and I will acknowledge you before my Father in heaven. Take up your cross, and even if you lose your life for my sake you will find it.

Jesus uses some pretty strident language about doing the right thing when conflict arises with people who are probably not horrible people. But family members, religious institutions, well-meaning government officials and their enforcement arms, and others can all get in the way of God's purposes when they lose sight of Jesus and his call to them. When all this is happening, we need to stay even more focused. When everyone is telling us that this is the way the world works and this is how to be successful and get-along, we are called to walk toward love of God and love of neighbor, feeding the hungry and visiting the prisoners and healing the sick and hungering and thirsting for righteousness. We may lose whatever identities we thought we had, and find a purpose and a calling in God that is even more meaningful, more joyful, and more fulfilling.

Of various streams of wisdom in these readings, I have chosen this focus because this morning we also have a parish meeting. That meeting deals with all the practical pieces of where we are as a parish in these complicated and changing times. As part of a sermon, however, we need to look at the deeper question of God's call to us? How do we ensure that we listen to Jesus's words in the Gospel and stay focused on him? How do we not get distracted like Abraham and Sarah

into doing a bunch of unhelpful things out of fear or looking backwards instead of taking the blessings that God is giving us?

A large part of the answer is by refocusing ourselves on our purpose and guiding principles. About twelve years ago the parish did a significant parish-wide discernment about why God put us here and what we are called to do. We looked at our history. We delved into our own values and the reasons for what we did. We talked to the community. We prayed and we listened deeply to God, to one another, and to the wisdom of others. We came up with a Purpose Statement that we believe articulates the reason God created St. John's and is applicable to all points in our parish history and future. We also put together six guiding principles that describe the "St. John's way" of doing things. When we live out our ministry according to these principles, things work better for us and God seems particularly to bless the work we do. We also came up with five strategic directions that were what we felt needed to be done at that moment. We might revise those strategic directions in the future, but they still feel appropriate for today.

I bring this up because we haven't talked about our purpose and principles a lot lately. For the past three years, our main focus has been survival – keeping people safe during the pandemic and then figuring out how to continue to be a church in the changing circumstances we found ourselves in. While we made some mistakes here and there, overall, we managed to make it through to today, when we have an opportunity to move forward.

I want to reintroduce our purpose and principles today. If you look at the second page of the Parish Meeting packet, you will find them and our strategic directions.

Our Purpose is *Worship God, Care for People, Grow as Christians*. This statement describes how St. John's lives out the Great Commandments and the Great Commission. We were founded to have a worshipping community. We are not a merely social service agency or just a Sunday school. Worship of God is the center of what we do, and will always be a key component of our ministry and mission.

We care for people. The primary way we as a church love others is that we reach out and care for them, as if we would care for our family. We feed people who need food. We offer hospitality to visitors. We build a swimming pool so people can learn to swim and not drown in the Shenango River. We help out when we can. That care looks different at different times, but we never stop caring.

We grow as Christians. We do the work we need to do to be better disciples. To learn about our faith and how to live it out in our lives. To grow as Christians has also meant for us helping children and youth develop in faith. St. John's has consistently done what we could to ensure that our young people and the young people in the community around us could learn about the love of God for them and the good news of Jesus. How this has happened has often changed, but it has always happened.

If our Purpose Statement gives us the "why", our guiding principles tell us "how" we carry out our work.

First, we ask for God's guidance and power to do the work he has given us to do. Prayer is important. We don't do things on our own, but we discern what God would have us do and expect that if we listen, God will bless what we attempt and let us accomplish it.

Second, we undertake activities to develop loving relationships among all people. This principle reminds us that people are primary. We don't do things primarily to build the institutional church or achieve some abstract goal. We do things in ways that develop love and deepen relationships between those involved. These relationships should be developed between parishioners working on something, between us and others we might serve, and for anyone else involved. If something we do doesn't increase love all the way around, we haven't done it right.

Third, we are hospitable and welcoming, inviting newcomers and strangers to join us. This principle is closely aligned with the sixth one, we engage the wider community in the work we do. These remind us that nothing we do is only focused inside on ourselves. In whatever we do, we offer an invitation to others to join us and we welcome them as part of our community. We shouldn't be surprised that the current leader of ECS doesn't attend worship at St. John's and we have had a number of other churches and agencies that have been crucial to the success of our community lunches. Sometimes ministries bring people into our worship on Sunday morning but often they don't. Nevertheless, when we see people helping us in our ministry who we don't necessarily recognize, and we make them feel loved and welcome, we know we are living into our calling.

We do what we do well for the glory of God. At our best, St. John's does things with excellence. Whether it is our worship service, the ECS cookies, our Kettle Corn, or our food pantry, we do things well. We aren't doing it for ourselves, but for God, and we offer to God our best work. This principle doesn't mean we need to be neurotic perfectionists or run ourselves to exhaustion, and it certainly doesn't mean making people feel bad while we try to attain some imagined standard. It means that when we pray and discern that we should do something, we do it intentionally, according to our guiding principles, and as best we are able.

Finally, we enjoy our work together and have fun doing it. This principle may seem odd for a church, where people often think things should be serious, but enjoyment and fun are important. In fact, surveys have shown that laughter in church is a key sign of love in a church. We can work hard and still enjoy what we are doing. Loving people and transforming lives should be fun, even if doing so is also sometimes poignant and difficult. If we do things in ways that make us all go home and wish we had done something else, we are failing miserably. Our moments together are an incredible gift, and even when things are difficult, hopefully our connections with each other have been positive and uplifting.

I'm not going to go into details about the strategic directions this morning, but they offer ways we can make a difference in the world. We want people to live into those strategic directions in our ministries, in whatever ways make sense. And we support those trying to undertake ministries at St. John's to live into these strategic directions however we can.

As our parish has intentionally lived into this purpose, principles and directions over the past decade a number of things have happened. We have started new ministries, such as the Saturday

lunches and the Musical Scholars. We have also found a focus in our welcoming of new members. We aren't just trying to be a better church than some other church, but we can demonstrate what we are about and invite people to join us in that mission. Not surprisingly, many of you have.

Perhaps most importantly, a common purpose, guiding principles, and strategic directions have allowed us all to pull together in the same direction. A parish like St. John's is complicated. We minister to a lot of people in a lot of different ways. We can too easily get blinders on about our own areas and our own goals, while losing the big picture. One of Sarah and Abraham's problem was they focused on one part of God's plan to the exclusion of others. God's plan still happened, but it was worse for them. Focusing on our parish purpose and principles reminds us that we are all living out God's call to us in this place. We are all seeking to worship God, care for people, and grow as Christians. As we work together and support one another, we all grow more effectively into this purpose.

While we are no longer in the midst of pandemic lock-downs, we know that St. John's will continue to face challenges and struggles. We have dealt with a lot over the past hundred and fifty years, and the next hundred and fifty years don't look to be any easier. We know, however, that regardless of the changes that might be coming, if we stay focused, together, on what Jesus is calling us to do, we will continue to *Worship God, Care for People, and Grow as Christians* in whatever situations the future brings.