

Losing Your Life to Save It

Gen 17,1-7,15-16; Mark 8:31-38

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, February 25, 2024

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Beloved appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and leaders shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and also give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; leaders of peoples shall come from her.”

Mark: 8:31-38:

From First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament (Adapted)

Creator Sets Free (Jesus) then began to instruct his followers that the True Human Being must suffer many things. The council of elders, the head holy men, and the scroll keepers would turn their faces from him. He would then be killed, and after three days he would return from the world of the dead. He said this openly to all his followers. Stands on the Rock (Peter) pulled him aside from the others and spoke sharply to him. Creator Sets Free (Jesus) turned and looked to his followers and then spoke sharply to Stands on the Rock (Peter), “Out of my way, Accuser (Satan)! These are not the thoughts of the Great Spirit, but of a weak human being.” He then gathered his followers and the crowd around him and said, “Any who want to walk the road with me must turn away from their own path and carry their own cross as they follow me to the place of ultimate sacrifice. “The ones who hold on to their lives will not find life, but the ones who are willing to let go of their lives, for me and for the good story I bring, will find the true life. How will it help you to get everything you want in this world but lose the true life? Is there anything in this world worth trading for it? There are bad-hearted and unfaithful people living today, in this generation, who are ashamed of me and my message. So, when the True Human Being comes to show the power and the shining-greatness of his Father/Mother along with his holy spirit-messengers, he will also be ashamed of these people.”

How many of you have been curious about your ancestry, where you come from, who your forebearers are? What do you think motivates us to learn about our ancestors and places of

origin? What are we yearning to know? Let's just chew on that for a moment in our own minds and hearts. – PAUSE - I am asking in part because our text from Genesis focuses on God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah who become the father and mother of many nations. Theirs is an ancestral origin story for many nations and for our faith tradition. More on this later.

What do you happen to know about where you come from? Most of us here probably have a white settler or more recent immigrant background. Some of us may not have had access to this information because our forebearers were taken away from their families and culture against their will and enslaved. Some of us may have been adopted and not know much, if anything, about our background. Asking who we are, where we come from, and what any of this means for our lives is a complex question to answer, to say the least.

For my birthday this year, I treated myself to a more extensive DNA test that traces my family on both sides for five generations and one going back much further in time through my mother's line.¹ I became curious about my ancestry because my eco-spirituality program included creatively rewriting our own story also in relationship to the land and its creatures.² I must admit, aside from my curiosity about my ancestor's origins, I probably also had romantic notions of what cultures or countries I would love to be connected to. It turns out that within the last five generations, I am just over 40 percent German, 11-13 percent each of Hungarian, Scandinavian, and French ancestry, and I have 5-7 percent Italian, English, Mediterranean Jewish roots plus some Spanish ancestry. When it comes to the lineage much further back, there are supposedly connections in many parts of the globe as far flung as India, Peru, and Sri Lanka to name a few.³ Fascinating! I bet you, there is likely also more diversity in your background than you suspect. This whole process

¹ Females cannot have this test done for their paternal line because we do not have a Y-chromosome unless we can get DNA from another male relative which I was unable to do.

² We are also being asked to write parts of our own story in a new way that envisions reintegrating fragmented parts and wounds, our own, those of the land and creatures, to create an empowering story. I am still working on that in more ways than one, but I was curious whether my ancestry would make a difference in how I would tell that story.

³ On my mom's side, the specific human DNA sub-group I belong to originated in Spain after the most recent ice age though more recent generations have very little Spanish left.

strangely made my particular ancestors more real. More importantly, I was reminded that we are all interconnected and intermingled in some way. To be human is to be intertwined and full of diversity.

Growing up in my ancient hometown of Trier, Germany, I was aware of some migration patterns and conquest stories that have shaped the history of its inhabitants. Trier is named after the Celtic tribe which founded it well over 2000 years ago. It was taken over by Romans and later by Huns (not the same as Hungarians), Franks and other dominant groups. Of course, Europe has seen many more conquests and movements of peoples, voluntarily or involuntarily. The same is true for this continent. It is telling how much our stories are shaped by conquests, intermingling of cultures, trading, human migration amidst a changing climate, and in ancient days the literal reshaping of our landmasses. Of course, ultimately, scientist link everyone's story back to human sapiens origins in Africa.

The Bible is quite full of origin stories and patrilineal genealogies. The biblical writers keep trying to string destinies together across time, asking who belongs, what the shared purpose of this journey is and what it means to be at home or in exile in the world, beginning with Adam and Eve. We heard of Noah and his descendants last week. Today, we encounter Abraham and Sarah who are given God's promise in covenant that they will be father and mother of multitudes. This childless couple in their 90s or so was told to set off on a journey to leave a settled and secure life behind to journey to another land God would show them. Not exactly what you would expect to happen at the age to say the least. I know more folks who opt to get into a retirement home or assisted living at that age. Not only are Sarah and Abraham moving into the unknown, they are given new names to signify their new identity. *Abram* which means "Father is Exalted" becomes *Abraham* - "Father of a Multitude." *Sarai* which means "My - as in Abram's personal- Princess" becomes Sarah or "Princess of all."

They set out on the journey, but don't get pregnant. In the process of struggling to trust God's promise of a child, they take things into their own hands. To secure an heir, Abraham has a child named Ishmael (which means "God will hear") with servant Hagar who had no

say in the matter. God hears Hagar's cries for help when she and her son get sent off into the wilderness after Abraham and Sarah have their own son Issac.⁴ I mention this because Muslims connect with Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham and Sarah became the spiritual ancestors of Judaism and Christianity via Isaac. In other words, they are all related according to the story. Sadly, narrow definitions of belonging and stories which supposedly divinely legitimate access to land have haunted the relationship between Jews and Muslims in Israel/Palestine for eons. They were also part of shaping the white settler conquest of this continent. These are among the shadows of our biblical story.

What fascinates me the most is the growing tension throughout the Bible to cast the circle of belonging, inclusion, and justice wider than previously known. This movement begins in the Hebrew Scriptures but comes to its fuller expression in Jesus. His genealogy as recorded in Matthew even includes several women, incl. two "foreigners". In fact, Jesus' resistance to limiting identity and belonging based on old tribal cultural identities and religious dogma is a reason why religious and political authorities reject him, as we heard in our text today. Jesus freely loves and heals those who have been rejected. He praises foreigners and non-Jews for their faithful understanding, treats women as equals and rejects any religious trappings which exploit people or question their dignity.

Meanwhile, even his own first disciples (which means students) still have the wrong notions about who he is. Some want him to become a powerful king/leader who restores occupied Israel to glory and offers them power as well. No one wants to hear about a price to pay for this. None understand that Jesus' way is not one of domination but of surrender of the heart for the sake of love, even if it entails suffering.

In our passage, Jesus predicts this suffering and reminds everyone who wants to follow him that they need to embark on the same journey of taking up the cross. For many of his friends, this did lead to actual physical martyrdom as it has for many faithful leaders in our world who have stood up for love, justice, and inclusion – no matter what their religion, race or ethnicity might be. We can think of civil or indigenous rights leaders in this country

⁴ Isaac means "laughter" because Sarah laughed when she was told she would get pregnant at her age.

Palestinians and Israelis who are refusing to hate each other despite the terrible bloodshed.

More broadly speaking, the “ultimate sacrifice” mentioned in our text is a deep surrender to love and our shared belonging in God. Our smaller self, governed by our necessary but limited ego, resists this with all its little might. We try to cling to identities like our culture, religion, ethnicity, political party, work accomplishments, and income and supposed status. We are often driven by fear for our survival which can convince us that scarcity is the law of the land rather than the beauty and abundance of life offered by God. Jesus says that when we cling in that way, we lose the very life we mean to save – right here, right now.

Jesus practices a kind of self-emptying of his agendas of survival and success so that he can be filled with a fierce and creative love which enlivens and enriches his life beyond measure. This is the “true life” worth living and there is nothing in the world “worth trading for it.” His Gospel – or “good story” – offers the path to live by as a daily practice. He challenges us to risk doing the same. This is not because suffering is to be glorified but to join in solidarity with all who suffer in our world, humans and more than human others.

The ultimate motivation is to set creation free. The *First Nations* translation of the NT we used for today translates the name Jesus or Yeshua as “Creator Sets Free.”⁵ One of the rich aspects of First Nations culture is the use of descriptive names for people based on their calling or that which gives them power. This is very much reflective of ancient Jewish culture as well. Jesus, “Creator sets free” embodies our God who seeks to set us free from the confines and illusions which hurt us, and cause hurt among us. He becomes “True Human Being” who reflects the beauty and integrity of God’s love for all people and creatures of this earth.

As people who seek to live as true human beings, how might we enact the invitation to cross the perceived boundaries between people, genders, races, and species in our own time and place to set each other free? How can we make the circle wider? Can you imagine

⁵ I need to name that the shadow side of missionaries introducing Christianity to native peoples has often been the eradication of native culture, religion, and language.

reaching out to one other human being this week whom you do not know or who triggers some resistance or prejudice in you? Can you imagine reaching out to support a woman in another country who is trying to live into her own power amidst forces of oppression? Can you imagine supporting an effort which protects members of another species? Can you surrender to learning about the suffering of another and its causes even if it makes you uncomfortable? If you are struggling yourself, can you imagine reaching out so others can learn and support you?

No matter how many DNA percentages we have of this ethnicity and place or that, we are all members of one human race in an interconnected web of being across species. Our shared inheritance is to live as those created by our God of abundance, emanating from the same source, sustained by the same source, and returning to the same source of love at the end of our earthly existence. We are all born gifted so we can take part in strengthening this web of life as we seek to become “true human beings.” The more we give ourselves to this “good story,” the richer and freer our lives become. God’s wisdom has ordained this. Jesus, “creator sets free,” has modeled it. The Spirit empowers us to tell and transform it with our own lives. Thanks be to God.

Benediction at the end of the Service: (taken from a blessing Clarissa Pinkola-Estés gives at the end of her Book *Dangerous Old Woman*.)

“Going over and over again one’s fears is empty and emptying. There is something greater that sustains, we call it Esperanza – hope. Call it *deser es espodar*. Hope and desire are power. Fear – ha, ha hum, pss, pss – consider that most fear is not fear of failure but fear to live fully in full power. Choose your petty fears carefully because they can grow really big teeth.

Instead, draw your attention here. I have several fears I would like you to have. Fear these: Fear not loving while you have the chance. Fear becoming bitter. Fear cynicism. Fear turning to stone, fear living underwhelmed by everything. When the culture draws you back and forth between being fearful and being a person who gives blessings, give blessings. When the culture drags you back and forth between fear and being merciful, be merciful.

When the culture drags you back and forth between being fearful and being forgiving, be forgiving. When the culture drags you back and forth between fearing and loving, when the great THEY say it must be decided, one or the other, you can either be fearful or the other, refuse to do only one. Choose all of them. Be fearful and bless others, be fearful and be merciful, be fearful and give, be fearful and do, be fearful and love. Because by the doing, the loving, the mercy, the forgiving, the blessing, the doing, fear is dissipated. So may it be for you, me, for all of us.

May you of “the tribe of the sacred heart”, the “many of us scar clan” be kept safe and watched over until we gather again ...”