

Tracy Daub
6/25/17--University Presbyterian Church
Genesis 21:1-21, Romans 6:1-11

A HEART CONDITION

I know that I am not a doctor. And as they say, I don't even play one on TV. So, my knowledge of medicine is limited. But notwithstanding that, if I had to diagnosis Sarah and Abraham's problem in our scripture today, I would say that they suffer from a heart condition. There is a problem with their hearts.

Let's recall some important facts about our story. God has promised to make a great nation from Abraham. But the problem was that Abraham and Sarah had no children. For years they longed for a baby, prayed for a baby, hoped for a baby. But when they became very old, it became clear that this baby was not going to happen and so Sarah decides to take matters into her own hands. She tells Abraham to take her Egyptian handmaid Hagar and to have a child with her--in what was an ancient form of surrogate motherhood. Of course, in that era, Hagar the maid would have had no choice in the matter. Abraham does as Sarah instructs and in time, Hagar the maid has a son, Ishmael. But then God appears to Sarah and Abraham and tells them that they too will have a son. This seems impossible given their age, but then indeed the miracle happens. Sarah has a baby boy--Isaac. It is a moment of great joy. God's blessings are astonishing. God's goodness is so great. Abraham and Sarah's hearts are full of joy.

But right in the middle of all this joy, right in the middle of abundant blessings and the promise fulfilled, the story takes an ugly turn. Sarah sees her baby playing with Hagar's baby and she grows jealous and fearful. She does not want this *slave* woman's son to share in the blessings that are due to her son Isaac. And so Sarah tells Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael. And while Abraham is not too keen on this idea, he nevertheless casts them out into the

wilderness with only extremely meager provisions. Out there in the scorching desert sun, with only one skin of water, Abraham had to know he was condemning this mother and child to their deaths.

Sure enough, the water soon gives out, and when Hagar can find no other source of water for them to drink, she knows that death is certain. She places her child under the shade of a small bush and goes off a ways so that she does not have to endure the agony of watching her son die. And she weeps.

But then another miracle occurs. God saves Hagar and Ishmael. God opens up a spring of water which flows from the ground and they are saved. And not only that, but God also makes a special promise to Ishmael. God tells Hagar, "Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Abraham and Sarah's son is not the only one to receive a special blessing from God, for Ishmael will also become the father of a great nation. And from this story, Muslims trace their lineage to Abraham through the son Ishmael, while Jews and Christians trace their lineage to Abraham through the other son Isaac. Two sons. Two promises. Two blessings.

It seems like a happy ending. But I am interested in that ugly turn that happened in the story--the point where Sarah, living in the fullness of God's abundant blessings, holding that miraculous gift from God, surrounded by evidence of God's lavish generosity, I am interested in that point at which Sarah grows jealous and protective of her son's inheritance. It is at this point that Sarah suffers from a profound heart condition. Standing in the midst of great blessings and generosity, Sarah becomes heartless and cruel.

It's ironic that at the very moment she is gifted with great blessings, that Sarah's heart should fail her. But we've seen that happen before, haven't we? The European settlers came to

this land fleeing their own sufferings from persecution. They landed here in this country of great abundance. But right at the moment they found the blessings of hope, a new life, freedom, the abundant resources of this land, right at that time their hearts failed them. They did not respect the people already living here. Over the course of building a nation, they were reluctant to share the blessings with others. They stole, and cheated, enslaved, and killed to secure all this land's blessings for themselves. These are *our* ancestors.

And this story gets played out over and over again in history as well as in our individual lives: people with blessings who fail to let generosity flood their hearts. This failure to be generous is what afflicts a great many of our hearts. We think of generosity as an action, which it is. But generosity is fundamentally an condition of the heart. Generosity isn't only whether we give things to others; generosity is also about how we regard our place in the world and our relationship with others, whether we are forgiving, whether we are compassionate, whether we accept others, whether we judge others, whether we include others.

If we consider ourselves to be Christians, then we have to pay close attention to this issue of generosity, because generosity lies at the core of the Christian faith. It really is a core component of the Christian faith. Because when we look at God, all we see is generosity and this is especially true in the life and death of Jesus. What we find in Jesus is evidence of God's generous love, generous forgiveness, generous acceptance, generous spirit of sacrifice for another. And this generosity is not because we deserve it, either. The Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us."

Think about how much easier it is to be generous with someone we like, with someone who deserves our help, with someone who has just suffered some undeserved misfortune. And

then think about what it takes to be generous with someone who is not always likeable, who has made mistakes, maybe even big ones, who has messed up and rejected good advice, who hurts people, who is sometimes selfish. Much harder. We all fall into that second category. We are all afflicted with a heart condition. And yet, God is generous with love and grace toward all of us.

Why? Why is God so generous to the undeserving? Paul writes to the Romans, "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." God has a remedy for our failing hearts. Generosity. God wants to give us new hearts so that we might walk in newness of life. New life comes from having new hearts. And the way to do that, the way to heal our hearts, is with generosity. Generous love. Generous forgiveness. Generous transformation. The whole point of Christ's life and death and resurrection, the whole point is so that we might have new hearts, repaired hearts.

That's what the Christian life is about--living with new hearts. But having a new heart, given to us by God, is not always a warm and fuzzy experience. Our transformation into generous people does not always *feel* good. Generosity can be hard, very hard. Forgiving is painful. Giving in a time of uncertainty is scary. Such times as these are our times of trial. That is when our Christian hearts are tested. You will recall that this is something we pray about in the Lord's Prayer. We pray, "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Some versions of the Lord's Prayer state, "save us from the time of trial." Life will test our hearts. When money is tight, when we've lost our job, when the market has dropped, how does our relationship with money change, or how we behave toward the needs of others? When terrorists attack and fear seizes us, how will we regard the refugee or the Muslim? Fear really puts our hearts to the test.

Think about the Japanese internment in this country during World War II. The Japanese had attacked our nation and people were seized by fear and anger. It was fear, coupled with existing prejudices, led our nation to carry out a tremendous injustice against Japanese-American citizens of this country--robbing them of their homes, jobs, lives and forcing them into internment camps. The internment of Japanese Americans was one of the dark times of our history. That was a time of trial, the time of testing of our hearts. And we did not pass that test. Save us from the time of trial, we pray, when our hearts are tested. Sarah faced her own time of testing, when her heart confronted her own insecurities, her own selfishness desires for her son. And in that moment, her heart failed her.

I find myself imagining how different the story might have been if Sarah had just relaxed a bit and trusted that there was enough of God's blessings to go around. Imagine a household where both boys grew up together knowing they were blessed, knowing that God intended goodness for them both, knowing the generosity of God's love as it was made visible in the people around them.

The other day Tim was recalling a story from his extended family. Back when Tim was young, his aunt and uncle lived in the Midwest with their family when one day a secret was revealed. It became known that the uncle had had an extramarital affair. The affair had resulted in the birth of a child who had been born with disabilities. Apparently the mother of the child was not going to be able to keep the baby. When news of the existence of this child and his situation became known to Tim's aunt, she said to her unfaithful husband, "Get in the car. We're going to California." And they drove to California and got the baby and brought him home where Tim's aunt and uncle raised him together.

Generosity comes in many forms and shapes. Sometimes it is very hard. Sometimes it is scary. Sometimes it can be painful. But always, always it is beautiful. Jesus shows us that truth with his very life, and then he gives us the gift of a new life with a new heart.