

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 13, 2018

## **One Woman's Story**

Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21

On this day when we honor mothers, and reflect gratefully on all the ways that they give us life and love, it's also important to remember women for whom this day can be difficult. Some are women who would love to be moms, but for various reasons are not. They may struggle with infertility, or had a child who died, or had an abortion. Others are women who struggle with idealized versions of motherhood that leave them feeling constantly distressed by their drive to attain the unattainable. Some are women who were birth mothers but gave their children up for adoption. Some are women who wrestle with ways that they've failed to be a source of strength, guidance, and love to their children. So while I certainly want us to honor mothers with a profound sense of gratitude and respect, and celebrate them as gifts to our families, our society, and our church, I also want us to use this day as an opportunity to widen our view and consider the experience of womanhood more broadly.

In one respect, there are clearly limitations on how deeply and thoroughly I can understand the experience of womanhood. In the opening chapter of Genesis, we hear, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). As you can see, I fall into the first of those categories. I'm not a female, so I'm standing here speaking from within the boundaries of my own experience as a male. But none of us has to be able to transcend our gender in order to see that according to the Scriptures, both men and women are formed in the image of God. And both are created to participate in the cultivation and flourishing of God's world. In other words, to reflect the image of God in the world. In this respect, the Bible has a really good start.

But as the story unfolds, mankind rebels against God, fails to trust in God's goodness, and opts for self-sovereignty over God's sovereignty. Things start to get messy and ugly. After the fall of mankind, strife, hatred, conflict, murder, oppression, and violence come onto the scene. And this includes oppression and violence toward women.

Prime examples can be found in today's Scripture readings from Genesis. Just sixteen chapters into the book, we meet Hagar. She's usually not the first name that comes to mind on Mother's Day. There are no greeting cards that draw upon her story. She doesn't appear in any commercials that portray the joys of being a middle class mom with an SUV, a local Walmart, and a home security system. On the contrary, Hagar is in a much more precarious and vulnerable situation. She's a domestic servant, a slave, for a prosperous man named Abraham and his wife Sarah. Sarah is unable to bear children, so following a common practice of the time, she offers her servant Hagar to Abraham. Hagar basically has no choice and no voice in becoming a surrogate mother. She's simply taken and given to Abraham.

When Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarah mistreats her and makes her life miserable, so Hagar flees. In fact, her name means "one who flees" or "one who seeks refuge." Hagar ends up in the desert, all alone, seemingly forgotten and unseen. But she's not invisible to God.

The Lord meets her and tells her that he has plans, a future, for her and her baby. And in response to how God has come to her rescue, Hagar names God. She says, "You are the God who sees me." "I have now seen the One who sees me" (16:13). So here is a woman, a woman with no powers or rights, seen by God, and heard by God.

In our own day and time, when women hold much more power and exercise many more rights, God is still seeing their lives and hearing their stories. Many of those stories are right here in the pews today. Your own stories. Stories of what it's like to be a young girl, moving from childhood into your teenage years. Stories of being a mother or a grandmother, raising and guiding children. Stories of being a wife and living faithfully in the covenant of marriage. Stories of being a single woman. Stories of making progress in your education. Stories of your work, at home and beyond the home. Stories of the career you've pursued and the things you've accomplished. The story of our congregation is comprised, in part, of stories of womanhood, of being a female in the contemporary world.

But like all churches, our congregation's story also includes stories of women's experiences of pain and mistreatment, whether as children or adults. The mistreatment may have come in a variety of forms. Sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, or verbal abuse. These types of experiences may have occurred in a variety of settings. In the workplace, at school, in the home, or even in places of worship. About a decade ago, in a survey of a large number of Christian women, a quarter said they had experienced sexually inappropriate behavior in a work setting, and of those women, a third said the behavior occurred in a church or ministry setting.<sup>1</sup>

Today's news includes a steady flow of stories about sexual misconduct against women. Just this past week, Eric Schneiderman, the attorney general of New York, who had been a champion of women's rights and an outspoken figure in the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, was accused of physical violence by four women with whom he had had romantic encounters or relationships. Bill Cosby was recently convicted on multiple counts of aggravated indecent assault. Similar charges have been raised against many men in various segments of society, including the entertainment industry, sports, government, business, and medicine. Granted, we have to remember that in each case, accusations and allegations have to be investigated and legal processes appropriately pursued and worked through. But even apart from what unfolds in court, it's clear that sexual mistreatment of women has been, and is, a widespread problem that calls for a serious response from many sources, including religious communities.

But the response from religious communities is complicated by the fact that some of the misconduct has taken place in communities of faith, at the hands of congregational leaders. Bill Hybels, the senior pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest churches in the country, recently stepped down amid allegations of misconduct involving women in the congregation. The head of one of our denomination's seminaries has recently been in hot water over comments he made years ago about divorce in cases of abuse, as well as remarks about women's appearances.

One of the signatories to an open letter sent to the seminary's trustees was author and Bible teacher Beth Moore. Some of you are probably familiar with Beth from her books, or her messages at conferences, or her materials that have been used in small group studies in many churches. Earlier this month, Beth posted an open letter on her blog, confessing her uncomfortable experiences as a woman in our denominational culture and speaking out against sexism in the church. In particular, she noted the following episode:

About a year ago I had an opportunity to meet a theologian I'd long respected. I'd read virtually every book he'd written. I'd looked so forward to getting to share a meal with him and talk theology. The instant I met him, he looked me up and down, smiled approvingly and said, "You are better looking than \_\_\_\_\_." He didn't leave it blank. He filled it in with the name of another woman Bible teacher.<sup>2</sup>

Moore goes on to stress that even though an incident like that may seem minor compared to other emerging stories of sexual abuse and assault, all such behavior springs from the same root of human sinfulness. And yet, she writes with hope because of the potential for forgiveness and healing that exists within the family of God, the people of God.

As we've seen in today's Scriptures, the story of the creation of God's people, who will be God's means of bringing blessing to all nations, is marked by scenes that underscore humanity's fallen state, including the inhumane treatment of women. The Bible doesn't gloss over these episodes and experiences, or treat them as negligible moments in the unfolding narrative of salvation. Instead, the Scriptures present us with sobering and convicting reminders about our lost condition apart from God. In today's second text, Hagar and her son Ishmael end up rejected and outcast, in what seems like a godforsaken place where all Hagar can do is keep her distance, so she doesn't have to watch her child die from dehydration. But once again, God is there. A God who hears the boy's crying, and moves into action to save.

This message of hope and deliverance is one of the reasons why many women who have been rejected or marginalized have found their story in Hagar's story. Joel Van Dyke, who works in missions in Central America, describes how the story of Hagar has been transformative in the lives of many people he has served. For instance, during a prison Bible study from Genesis 16, a group of women who could relate to feeling nameless and used by people in positions of power and authority, heard about how the angel of the Lord showed respect to Hagar by becoming the only one in the narrative to address her by name. Then the angel asked Hagar a beautiful question: "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" (v. 8). This question opened a door and empowered Hagar to tell her own story.

And through this encounter with Scripture, the women in the prison saw themselves in Hagar, and experienced power to tell their own stories. In fact, a few weeks after the Bible study, when a wall was being constructed to separate the men and the women in the prison, the idea emerged to paint a mural on the wall. After discussion, the women came to a unanimous decision to paint the story of Hagar, with the words *El Dios Que Me Ve* ("the God Who Sees Me") as the focal point of the piece.<sup>3</sup>

Today, we've come together again to worship the God who sees, the God who hears. He sees and hears and knows the stories of mothers whom we honor. But he also sees and hears and knows the stories of women more broadly, especially those who suffer from experiences of namelessness, disrespect, mistreatment, abuse, violence, or harassment. Some of them are folks we interact with on a daily basis, in the workplace, in places where we do business, at school, at home, or in the neighborhood. Some of them are folks right here in our congregation and our community.

What does this mean for our life together as a congregation of Jesus' followers? It means that instead of being silent about these issues, we who profess to be God's people in Christ will remember our call and act on our commission to be an instrument of healing and hope, to be a channel of God's blessing to the world, especially here in our sphere of influence. It also means that we'll be a community of faith where there's room for victims to have some

way to share and tell and work through their stories of hurt, and room for perpetrators to journey into confession, forgiveness, repentance, and reform. It means helping boys and men grow in learning how to relate to and treat girls and women with respect, dignity, gratitude, and Christlike love. And perhaps most of all, it means being a congregation where we as males and females, men and women, live and worship and work together in equality and mutuality, so that we faithfully embody and reflect the image of God in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard R. Hammar, *Church Law & Tax Report* (March/April 2018) 1.

<sup>2</sup> Beth Moore, "A Letter to My Brothers." The LPM Blog. May 3, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2018 <<https://blog.lproof.org/2018/05/a-letter-to-my-brothers.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Van Dyke and Chris Rocke, "Asking the Beautiful Question." Christianity Today website. March 24, 2010. Accessed May 10, 2018 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/main.html>>.