

Healing Our Collective Wounds
Dr. Patricia L. Hunter
October 18, 2020



Affirmation of Faith

We will actively work to recognize and change our own biases and to fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic oppressions.

Scripture Genesis 21:8-14

The child Isaac grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So, she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

May our God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of this sacred word.

This fall we are looking at our congregational values and today we are exploring our fifth faith value which reads: We will actively work to recognize and change our own biases and to fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic oppressions. Amen to that! You can find all our congregational values on our website under the About Us tab.

To recognize and change our biases is complicated. Frequently our biases are wrapped in our highly prized privileges. Those privileges can cloud our self-discovery and stifle our honesty when assessing the equitable nature of our actions and our beliefs. I’m sure you’ve heard

someone say, I'm not racist, I live in a mixed neighborhood, or I have friends who are people of color, or I taught underprivileged children. Sometimes our privileges cloud our reality.

We may have privileges afforded to us because we are in good health, educated, male, white or able to pass as white, owning property, and investments. We may have privileges because we are heterosexual, cis-gendered, or married with kids.

We may have some of these privileges on one hand **and** face discrimination on the other for being queer, having chronic health issues, and for being BIPOC. We may experience discrimination due to our physical ability or disability, or for being poor and living month to month on limited income. And discrimination is real for those over age 50.

Our faith value reads that we will recognize and change all systemic oppression. Not only is this the right thing to do, it is also a spiritual mandate. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he quoted the prophet Isaiah when he said,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

To minister to the poor, and the captives, and those of ill health, and those bound internally and externally by bad theology is our Divine Work. It is our God Work. Those of us who follow the way of Jesus can do no less than what he did in recognizing and calling out oppression. As we call out unjust treatment of God's beloved people, we will usher in healing as we work toward systemic change.

We will fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic oppressions.

That is a mouthful. The reason so many oppressions are listed is because there is

intersectionality of oppressions, that makes isolating one justice issue nearly impossible. If we are going to take climate justice seriously, we have to acknowledge the impact of pollution on communities of color and poor people. If we are going to work at being anti-racist, we also have to look at the impact of race on health, race and gender, and racial discrimination in our educational systems. I am a Black cis-gendered, healthy, well educated, property owning, lesbian. I cannot look at the impact of oppression through just one lens—that of being a female. I can't separate myself into tiny boxes like that. There is intersectionality when we do justice work. All oppressions have to be acknowledged and worked on simultaneously.

I have chosen to use the Hebrew bible story of Sarai, Hagar, and Abram as a way to discuss today's congregational value. If you are familiar with this story you know that Sarai and Abram have a name change to Sarah and Abraham. So, for convenience sake I will call them Sarah and Abraham in my message today.

Abraham was the great patriarch in Hebrew Scriptures. The Holy One promised him that he would be the father of a great nation and that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. Ah, what a blessing except, there was one itsy-bitsy problem, Abraham was mid-eighties, married to Sarah who was almost as old as he, and they had no children. You do the math. It is hard to have innumerable descendants when you have no kids.

According to Womanist Hebrew Scholar, Dr. Renita Weems in *Just a Sister Away*, in that day a woman's womb was her destiny. Sarah was well beyond the child-bearing age. The chances were exceedingly slim that she would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky. Sarah's barrenness made her a woman to be scorned.

Although scorned on one hand, Sarah had enviable privileges and wealth because she was married to Abraham. According to Weems, wherever human worth is measured by purchasing power, there is always the problem of class prejudice. Sarah felt the sting of oppression for being female and childless. Yet, her class status allowed Sarah to have slaves.

One of her slaves was an Egyptian named Hagar. Scripture says that Hagar was a slave-girl. She was young. Hagar was Sarah's property to do with as she chose. Sarah had the bright idea, that if Hagar got pregnant by her husband Abraham, then Hagar's children would be considered her children and the scorn of being childless would no longer haunt her. So, Sarah gave her slave-girl Hagar to Abraham to be raped and to get pregnant.

This part of the story is horrifying to us, and I'm sure it was horrifying to Hagar. No woman ever wants to be raped, no matter the culture or the time. Hagar had no agency. She was a slave. While this biblical story happened way before the common era, not too long ago my slave foremothers were systemically raped in this country by slave owners frequently *with* the consent of their wives. That horrifying reality was only 155 years ago. The wounds of that evil still await healing in our country, in my DNA, and in our memory.

While the supporting characters of Hagar and Sarah speak to me in this text, this story in the Hebrew bible is actually Abraham's story. The story is about how YHWH fulfills YHWH's promises. It is not a story of how systemic oppression was addressed, ended, and all was put right. But my hermeneutic of suspicion, and womanist leanings, requires me to look for the voices of the marginalized in biblical texts.

Here is where sorting out all these oppressions gets messy. In this story we have oppression based on race, class, nationality, age and gender. We so want to believe that those who experience oppression, will be more just in their interactions with those who have even fewer privileges. We certainly want to believe that women are more sensitive to the needs of the less fortunate. Yet, that is not where this story leads us. Yes, Sarah experienced oppression because of her gender and the cultural stigma of being childless. In that cultural setting, Sarah belonged to Abraham, but she had wealth. She owned Hagar, a foreigner—an Egyptian girl.

After Hagar got pregnant, Sarah's treatment of Hagar was brutal. Although Sarah wanted Hagar to get pregnant, once that actually happened Sarah resented her. Hagar's treatment was so brutal that her only recourse was to run away. But, where is a pregnant, young, foreigner to go?

Hagar prayed to God after she ran away from Sarah's brutal abuse, and God told her to return to Sarah.

Now let me stop for a minute and say, I really don't like that part of the story where Hagar is told to return to Sarah. I would not counsel a person in a dangerous, life threatening, abusive relationship to return to their abuser. There are resources available that can help you get free. The phone number for the National Domestic Violence Hotline is 800-799-SAFE (7233).

Womanist Hebrew scholar, Dr. Mitzi J. Smith, wrote in *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, that Sarah's treatment of Hagar was just as harsh as Pharaoh's treatment of the Hebrews when they were captive in Egypt.

Time will not permit me to unpack all the intricacies of this story. I encourage you to read Genesis chapters 15-21 for the rest of the story. Eventually, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to a son Isaac. Yet, still there was no peace of mind for Sarah. There was extreme jealousy and tension between the mothers. Hagar and her son were banished from their home and sent to the wilderness in all likelihood to die. It is a painful story to read, but eventually God's liberating and healing presence interceded at Ismael's cry and God saved Hagar and her son. God will hear our cry of desperation in the midnight hour. According to the Hebrew text Ismael and his descendants also became a mighty nation.

As much as we want all the stories in scripture to have a happy storybook ending—they don't. The story of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham reminds us that oppression is real. Jealousy is real, and healing and liberation may not come as quickly as we like. Nevertheless, we must not give up.

At times we will be disappointed by those who say they are our allies. Historically, women of color hoped that white women would be our allies against oppression. Yet, recently I was again reminded of the intersectionality of oppression as women celebrated the 100th anniversary of the passing of the 19th amendment. It allowed white women the right to vote, but black women had to wait 45 years longer before we had the right to vote with the passage of the voting rights act in 1965. Excluding women and men of color from the 19th amendment in 1920

was an intentional choice the suffragettes made in the struggle for the right to vote. And to this day, there continues to be an all-out assault on communities of color, to inhibit their ability to cast their votes in the upcoming presidential election.

Yes, to recognize and change our biases is complex and complicated. It is hard work because there may be generational pain that has to be unearthed and named before healing can occur. Each layer of oppression come with unique pain—race, class, sex, gender identity, age, ability, and more. We as a congregation vow to recognize the hurt and work toward healing. That is a high bar and a high calling.

Good thing we know the Great Healer and the Spirit of Wisdom who will chart a way for us as we name generational hurt resulting from systemic oppression.

Lastly, our congregational value reads, we will actively work to recognize and change our own biases. Sometimes those biases are directed on ourselves. Ridding ourselves of internalized racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, is huge. Convincing ourselves that we are good enough, we are beautiful enough, we are smart, we are capable, we are forgiven, and we are wonderfully created in the image of God takes work. And yes, we are worth the effort.

Yes, we will actively work to recognize and change our own biases and to fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic oppressions. Church this congregational value of faith is complex and complicated. We can't do this one on our own, but with God all things are possible. It may take a lifetime to rid our world of hatred and bigotry, but the way of Jesus calls us to be healers. We will work to heal every wound of every oppression. And all the people of God said, Amen.