

HOW WAS IT, REALLY?

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Jesus said, “*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*” (Matthew 10:29-31)

John Updike was a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, poet, and author of numerous short stories. He is often regarded as one of the great American writers. Yet for all this, I hadn’t paid much attention to him until a parishioner at my previous parish handed me one of his short stories that she’d cut out of *The New Yorker* magazine (5/17/99). It was the first Father’s Day that I was a father, and she said, “You ought to read this. It’s a cautionary tale.” So I read it, and saved the copy all these years.

The story is a semi-autobiographical piece of Updike’s work entitled, “How Was It, Really?” A man in his 60’s named Ed Franklin tries to look back on his life and assess the adequacy of his role as a parent. It’s been twenty-two years since he divorced his first wife of twenty-two years. Together they had four children. But now, two decades later, Ed Franklin can remember very little of it. He can vaguely recall the details of one birth. He has no recollection of when the children first crawled, walked, talked, or read. He wonders, *Did he help the kids with their homework? Did he ever go grocery shopping? The beds, how had they got made, and the meals, how had they got onto the table for twenty-two years?* He concludes that his ex-wife must have done it all, while he read the sports pages and drank. So how was it, really? How did Ed Franklin do as a parent? If truth be told, he simply can’t remember.

The irony of the story is that Ed Franklin’s four children, now grown and raising families of their own, have made a monumental figure out of their father. They have set him high on a pedestal. They revere him as an *epic family man, chopping forests into cabins in the wilderness of the baby boom*. Yet in Ed Franklin’s heart of hearts he knows that nothing could be further from the truth. Through all of his musings he notices how his children seem to be falling into the pattern he set. All four are professionally successful, and emotionally detached from their children. All four have delegated the day-to-day tasks of parenthood not even to spouses, but to maids, caregivers, and hired help. Indeed, the sins of one generation are passed on to the next, even magnified. Little did Ed Franklin realize the consequences of the example he set years ago.

It is only by a strange coincidence that today’s reading from Genesis (21:8-21) lands on Father’s Day. Whether you are a father or a mother or just someone trying to assess your family dynamics, the story of Abraham comes as a cautionary tale. True, three great world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – trace their origins back to Abraham. We have set him high on a pedestal. But how was it, really, being one of his two sons? Frankly, Abraham’s record as a father is dubious at best. Today we heard about Ishmael, the first born son of Abraham. The story goes that Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless, but they fervently believed God had promised them a son and heir who would make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. The problem was, they were elderly. Sarah was already well past child bearing age. Then more years went by and she still couldn’t conceive. What could be done?

Sarah decided that desperate times called for desperate measures. It would be necessary to force God’s hand. They would have to sin so that grace might abound. Sarah proposed that Abraham father a child with her Egyptian slave girl named Hagar. Since Hagar belonged to Sarah, so also would the child. Thus, Abraham and Sarah would have their heir. Abraham agreed to the scheme.

Hagar conceived and bore a son named Ishmael. Abraham loved Ishmael, but the family dynamic was highly dysfunctional. Sarah and Hagar did not get along well with each other. Abraham still held out hope that God would deliver on his promise through Sarah. So Ishmael must have grown up wondering where he belonged. Was he a mistake? Did he matter? Then, when Ishmael was 13-years old, what must have been his worst fear came true. Sarah conceived and bore a son named Isaac, who would be the true heir of Abraham. In short order the household wasn't big enough for two sons with two different mothers. Sarah decided that Isaac was in and Ishmael was out. She directed Abraham to send Hagar and her son away. Abraham agreed. Happy Father's Day.

Today it would be hard to read the story of Hagar and Ishmael and not see it through the lens of the issues that currently roil the nation. As an Egyptian, Hagar was most likely black. When the provisions of bread and water that Abraham had given her ran out, Hagar sat apart from Ishmael and wept because she could not bear to watch her son die. Nevertheless, God heard the crying of Ishmael and Hagar. In the eyes of God – if I might be permitted to borrow the phrase – these black lives mattered. As Jesus would explain many centuries later: *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”* God directed Hagar's attention to a well of water, and they both survived. They did more than survive, they thrived – not because of Abraham's epic fatherhood, but despite his failings.

Today's reading from Genesis might cause us to wonder why we place Abraham on a pedestal and revere him as a monumental figure. I give you fair warning, in next week's reading (22:1-14) he comes off even worse. One could argue that Ishmael got off easy compared to what is in store for Isaac. Still, we might ask: how was it, really, for Ishmael and Hagar? An alternate reading of the story seems entirely plausible. Hagar was an astute judge of persons and realized that she and Ishmael would have better luck on their own than they would in the dysfunctional household of Abraham. Therefore, it could be that she herself brought the conflict with Sarah to a head, and initiated the sharp break with Abraham because she knew the deck was stacked against her son. The author of Genesis indicates that she had a strength of character and force of will that would serve her well in raising Ishmael alone. So perhaps it's time to knock Abraham off his pedestal, which seems to be a thing to do in the spirit of our times.

Yesterday morning over breakfast I read in *The New York Times* how portraits of former congressmen who served in the Confederacy are being removed from the Capitol building in Washington, DC. Also up for debate is a statue of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy. I confess that my spoonful of cereal paused in mid-air. A statue of Jefferson Davis in the US Capitol? Why on earth, in the hallowed halls of our most recognizable government building, do we have a statue of someone who led an armed insurrection against the United States? Jefferson Davis was a traitor, not a role model. His wasn't just a lost cause, it was the wrong cause. No, I've never lived in the south, so perhaps I should pipe down, but I won't. Do we name churches after Judas Iscariot, or municipal buildings after Benedict Arnold? By no means!

Jesus declared, *“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”* Likewise, the current scouring of history seems to be accelerating and knows no bounds. Now we hear calls to remove statues of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson from government grounds because they were slave owners. To add to Jefferson's crimes, he was also a really terrible, truly awful Biblical scholar. So do his shortcomings as a theologian – if, indeed, he can even be called a theologian – invalidate the Declaration of Independence, of which he was the principal author? By no means, we say. We have to draw the line somewhere. Cooler heads must prevail. But the high-beam headlights of scrutiny aim to leave no one in the dark. Even John Updike, a mere 11 years after his death, is caught in the glare. Literary critics are calling him a misogynist who lionized narcissistic men like Ed Franklin. What then: shall we strike his books from school libraries and curricula? I have no easy answers here, other than to say beware of putting anyone on a

pedestal. Today's heroes may be tomorrow's villains. These days I wonder if we will ever be able to look up to anyone, ever again.

Forgive my momentary plunge into the pessimism of our day. It's just that sometimes, spotting the love of God in a challenging passage of Scripture or the tumult of society is a bit like looking for Waldo in the children's picture books (or hidden in the church this morning). You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is here, but where and when? Well, look closely. One thing to keep in mind about the Scriptures is that the love of God always eventually shines through them. God heard the cries of Hagar and Ishmael and blessed them abundantly. Listen to how the author of Genesis describes it: *God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.* Live in the wilderness. Shoot your bow and arrow. Mom goes out and gets you a wife. It sounds like a blessed life to me!

What is more, the Scriptures usually make no attempt to scrub up the tarnished images of the people whom God chooses to be agents of the divine will. God does not wait for perfect people and tranquil family dynamics before working his loving purposes through them. Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, the patriarchs and prophets, the judges and kings, the disciples of Jesus and Paul the Apostle were all deeply flawed and fragile figures. But St. Paul would write, as we heard in Romans (6:1-11) today, that because of what Christ has done for us, we all have the opportunity to walk in newness of life. He writes: *We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin ... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.* What does it mean? Perhaps this: if role models are scarce these days, it could be that the calling of God is for you to be one. You never know who may be following and watching.

I remember a time years ago when I was a student over at General Seminary. In those days we boasted a rag-tag basketball team, and one winter weekend we all piled into a rented van and traveled to Pittsburgh to play against a seminary team there. We finished the game in the early evening, and decided to make the trip back the same night – probably a six to seven hour drive. We weren't far along at all on the Pennsylvania Turnpike when the snow started, and soon we were in the midst of a blizzard. Traffic slowed, and eventually disappeared altogether until it was only us on the highway. Correction: it was only us, and one other car, directly behind us, with high beams on full force. I was driving, trying to creep my way along the Turnpike, unsure at times of where the road even was. With every mile I became increasingly annoyed at this person practically riding on our bumper. "Haven't I enough to worry about without this pest on my tail?"

Finally, towards the end of the Turnpike the snow stopped. Before crossing into New Jersey I pulled off at the first available gas station, hoping to be rid of the tailgater. But alas, the car followed us to the same gas station, right up to the pump next to our van. For an instant it occurred to me that here was an opportunity say something sarcastic (which would have been totally uncharacteristic of me, you understand): "Were you absent from school the day they taught about high beam headlights?" Or, "Why didn't you just tie a rope to our bumper and save yourself some gas?" But before I could say anything stupid, a young mother stepped out of her car. Inside were her three small, sleeping children in car seats. She thanked me profusely for allowing her to follow us. "We never would have made it had you not been on the road ahead of us," she said. "I don't know what we would have done."

Attention fathers, mothers, and Christians all: flawed and fragile though we may be. You just never know who may be following on the road behind you, trailing in your tracks, taking your lead, matching your moves. Perhaps we can summarize the cautionary with a well-known, often-quoted phrase: *Be careful how you live your life. You may be the only Bible someone else ever reads.*