

“FOR ALL THE CHILDREN”

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Text: Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:24-39

Willow

I read a story that a fellow clergy person had written. It's the story of "Willow". Every day as the Johnson kids played in their yard they would notice that they were being watched from the tree-line. The Johnson's lived on a nice estate just this side of Greenville. It was a time when the days seemed "care-free" and they enjoyed frolicking on the lawn, followed by refreshing homemade lemonade. As they played, they knew they were being watched. It was happening almost every day, and by now they knew it was an eight-year-old boy, son of one of the hired hands, a boy who was oddly called "Willow".

Willow was a boy who lived off down the hollow with his mother and stepfather and his infant stepbrother. His father had died shortly after his mother had given birth, or so he had been told. His mother apparently had re-married, and now had a new-born son with this new father. His mother was a "back woodsy" servant woman, his stepfather was a big burly black man named Cletus. Things were already bad, before the baby came, but since then it turned simply upside down. Willow was of fair complexion for a black boy, and many would think him almost white. It was clear he was not his stepfather's boy. And from the very beginning his stepfather did not seem to want him around.

Every morning "Willow" would leave the house early to stay out of Cletus' way. Even his mother did not seem to want him around, lest it set Cletus off into a frenzy of screaming. If he didn't leave, his "paw" was sure to begin yelling at him, and would finally say something like "Get your little behind out of this house before I get me one of those weeping willow switches and brand your "name" right into ya." It was surely the roots of a name that had stuck to him, like molasses on bark. And so, he was simply called "Willow" for as long as he could remember.

So off Willow would go, spending most of the day looking out over at the Johnson's, just wishing that something like this could be his. While he ate a few bugs, the Johnson's had a

picnic on the lawn. While his stomach ached, the Johnson's grew strong. While his heart yearned for someone to care for him, the Johnson's never lacked anything. He couldn't go home because his stepfather would surely "beat him as look at him". Meanwhile his brother - his infant brother - was safely at home being nourished and cared for. In fact, one day he even paused by the windowsill as he overheard his paw saying to his little brother, "Now, now, sweet child, you will be the one to carry on our name". No doubt, Willow would scurry back beneath the fronds and gaze across the field at the Johnson house, only dreaming of better days.

Ishmael

Perhaps with this story of "Willow" on our minds we can go back to Genesis, to the ancient Hebrew story of the offspring of Abraham. Go back to a story that is not too distant from Willow's. Go back to a story that may not be too distant, even from some of our own. A story about his children, an older son "Ishmael", born to Abraham from a slave woman named "Hagar", and his now infant son Isaac, born as promised by God to Abraham and his wife Sarah. Perhaps things had been fine for a while, Sarah sharing Abraham's love with a stepson, and with her own slave woman, but now that her son had been weaned, it was time for change.

"Cast out this slave woman, and her son", Sarah begged of Abraham. He doesn't deserve any of the inheritance. Is Sarah really expressing some concern about her own son's future? Expressing some overprotective motherly love? Or is Sarah here expressing a view that she doesn't like them because of their status? She doesn't even refer to him by name in this story, but simply, and crudely as "the son of a slave woman". For one son she wants the inheritance, the blessing, for the other son she simply rejects him into the wilderness, and to its fate.

It was distressing to Abraham, but even God is seen as urging him to listen to his wife, and "not be distressed". It appears (vs 14) that God sides with Sarah. But I wonder if "God only used the actions of Sarah", "letting her do her own thing", to fulfill and bring about his own purpose in the end. You see, Sarah thought this story was about "blessing the children". Specifically, her child, and her child alone. Sarah seems to think this story is about selfishly offering the inheritance to those who were her offspring; to those who looked like her and acted like her. It was "The fulfillment of the divine promise" and in Isaac's birth it occasioned both problems and possibilities. The immediate problem of course had to do with Abraham's two sons. Of which Sarah determined, one, had to go.

"This town ain't big enough for the two of us, and one of us has to go, and it ain't me or mine." Sarah took this attitude as she proclaims to Abraham "get that kid, and his back woodsy salve-woman mother out of town".

And even amid someone casting out a child, God intends to work, and so He says to Abraham, "don't be distressed"... "listen to her"... "I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." Even though someone like Sarah would choose to make someone an outcast; choose to look down at him; thumb her nose at them; or think ourselves better because someone isn't like us... Even though Sarah responded this way, and you and I may respond this way by casting out people from our lives, that does not mean that God will respond the same way.

In fact, he can "make for good, what men intend for evil" (Gen 50:20 paraphrased). In fact, what Sarah meant to be a story about the promise to her son Isaac, God used as a story to proclaim that "Ishmael and Isaac are both children of promise". "God would not overlook the Ishmael's; indeed, God makes promises to him as well."

God could even use Sarah's jealousy, and pride to be a point of blessing in an outcast child's life. One scholar said it like this "God works with individuals on the scene; God does not decide to perfect people before deciding to work through them". But He used "Sarah's strategy, however inadequate" as an open door for which to bring about the blessing for all of Abraham's children.

And thank God for the pleading cries of Hagar the mother who not only did her best but cried out to God for his mercy.

Where are we in the story?

Let's take a look at how we might find ourselves in this story. First let's ask ourselves: How have we been Sarah? How have we outcast people or children because they are different than us? A child with aids? A child who has been left as an orphan? A child who looks different? Isn't our own? Do we look down on the poor? Close our doors to those less fortunate than us? How have we the Church, been Sarah and rejected and banished a child; someone to the wilderness because they weren't like us; didn't dress like us; didn't talk like us; look like us; worship just like us? And yet, God's blessing is upon all the children. "Hold up that child he told Hagar"... "Come lift up the boy and hold him up with your hand and I will make a great nation of him."

Secondly, we may find ourselves in the story sort of as at least appearing "apathetic" yet "faithful" follower Abraham. A bit distressed by what we see, but mostly complacent in our

response. Maybe even feeling that God is doing something, even allowing this to happen for some unknown reason. Trusting for the moment that God's plan is greater than ours.

Thirdly: Perhaps we are like Hagar, pleading for mercy for those who have been cast out by society? Pleading for mercy for children who have been abused? Children who have been neglected? Trying to rescue the orphaned and abandoned. Pleading for mercy for those who have not, while we have? Or even if we have not, pleading from the center of our "have-not-ness" for someone, some child to be lifted out of our own condition. Are we crying out for those who have been cast out? I heard recently of a Pastor who was praying for growth in his Church by praying "Lord send us the ones that no one else wants!" That is so good, "send us the Ishmael's"; "Lord, send us the ones that no one else wants". Let us be a blessing on all of the children. Let us pray for mercy for all children. Let us respond to God with a hearty "Thank you God for kids; not just the ones that are flesh and blood to me; but through Christ and your mercy, may all children be "children of the promise".

Willow

One of the children noticed that "Willow" hadn't moved for a long time beneath the leafy fronds beside the grassy yard of their estate. They moved closer to investigate, and Willow seemed unconscious. He lacked food and water and had become dehydrated in the hot summer sun. Soon they had Mr. Johnson out there with them, and he had carried the boy up to the shaded porch. He called for his wife, and they were soon sponging him down with cool water and putting drops of water upon his pursed lips. Mr. Johnson had noticed the severe bruise marks across the boys back and legs.

Willow was weak all the night, and the Doctor just wasn't sure how he would do. Willow's mother had been summoned and she quickly spoke to Mr. Johnson and in private to his oldest boy Abe. She quietly told Abe the story, and she asked him to help. "Don't let me see the death of my boy," she pleaded, "Don't let me see the death of my boy!" Abe Johnson soon repeated the story to his Father in the other room. It was a troubled look that came over his father's face as Abe Johnson asked "if the boy could stay with and live with them?"

You see, what Abe knew was, that from a moment of indiscretion, this child, was his. Willow was the child of the son of a wealthy landowner, and the child of a servant girl. And now somewhere in the middle, he was an outcast.

Mr. Johnson leaned back in his rocker and spoke "Go lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand", "for I will make a great nation of him also, because he is your offspring". Go lift up that child! Go hold fast that outcast! Go lift up that first born, and second born and stepchild and let God's blessing be upon all the children!