

**Sermon: A House Divided**  
**Scripture: Genesis 21:8-21**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
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We say that Abraham is the Father of 3 faiths, in fact together we call ourselves as Christians, Jews and Muslims, the Abrahamic Faiths **SLIDE** understanding ourselves as having a common root and relationship in the covenant that God made with Abraham which said that if he was faithful he would be made the father of many nations. Abraham was faithful and the father of nations he became. **SLIDE** But as we all know family dynamics can be tricky and there is in these ancient stories a foreshadowing of the enmity that we Christians, Jews and Muslims have known across the centuries to the present day. **SLIDE**

Abraham, the Father of nations, the patriarch of a family divided and the scripture we consider this morning is a snippet from that epic convoluted story which suggests that from the very beginning we were divided – Ishmael and Hagar banished, Sarah angry, Abraham spineless and making things worse and that's just the Abraham story. Such stories of conflict and division are littered through the origin stories of Genesis so much so that one could almost think that God intended it to be so.

In the beginning was Eden, **SLIDE** a place of perfect unity and peace and at-home-ness. And this lasts in our origin story all of a couple chapters before the human being is driven out and separated from this perfect place of union with God. **SLIDE** And then we have a thousand some odd pages that follow which could be described as one long account - in writings of history, poetry, song, legal documents, prayers, letters and devotionals – of increasing human division and scattering **SLIDE....** which then though

gives us our job, our purpose, which is returning, the work to get back home to the unity and perfection of Eden, which we all have some hinting of in the deepest parts of souls.

But let us try and get our minds around this notion that while our ultimate home might be there in that profound place of completeness and unity that we can sense, there is also a necessity and GOODNESS, one might even say in being divided, separated, distinct. The writer and Christian apologist GK Chesterton has a beautiful quote that captures it. **SLIDE** He says: *“If souls are separate love is possible. If souls are united love is impossible. A man may be said loosely to love himself, but he can hardly fall in love with himself.... Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces, because they are living pieces and can be loved.”* Love is what is suddenly and miraculously allowed or enabled in a world that is no longer in perfect union. Of course rivalry and hatred is then possible too **SLIDE** – note Cain and Abel, Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Pharaoh, Jesus and Herod, Christians and Jews, Jews and Muslims, Christians and Muslims – but such rivalry and hatred, we can only assume, is a small price to pay for the wonder of Love enabled. **SLIDE**

In the face of the division within ourselves and our communities, even our families, the great desire we all have for all our relations is for there to be unity among us. The temptation is that it can lead to an insistence upon it and an effort to force it into being, to take back Eden by violently storming it! This is done by those in power at times by denying that there are any dissenting, differing voices or by outright suppressing of them – a forced and enforced unity of mind at the expense of those who are on the margins and

think differently and reveal our dividedness of mind and heart as humans, communities, nations. **SLIDE** Global history and the global present day is littered with examples of exactly this dynamic of enforced unity. And if we look honestly we can find the dynamic operating at the interpersonal level as well.

So then what is the right thing to do about this divide among us and our honest desire for harmony and unity? If our temptation in our lower selves is to suppress the divisions and distinctions and force a unity, then what might our higher selves (the image of God within us) require of us?

It requires us not to deny the division or suppress the distinctions but to step right into the middle of it with LOVE. And what does that look like? The 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher and theologian Simone Weil says it most aptly when she says: **SLIDE** “to love is simply to put yourself in the shoes of the other.” This is how we love our family members, our spouses, our friends, and even our enemies. We do everything we can - not to work to be understood but rather to understand the other. **SLIDE** This is the practical way to love. Simple? yes. Easy? No way! For everything in us screams out to be understood and to persuade the other of our point of view even to the point of violence at times. But the rigorous demand of love, which is not for the faint of heart, is to seek to understand the other. Remember the second half of St. Frances’ prayer: **SLIDE** “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.” That’s it.

And of course, the physical, symbolic representation of this kind of love that steps not away from the division but right into the middle of it is none other than Jesus on the cross **SLIDE** who cries out from that cross not “God destroy mine enemies” or “annihilate the infidel” but rather “Lord,

forgive them for they know not what they do!” And how could he possible ask that for the sake of his very executioners? Only because - despite the fact that he has not been understood, even by his best friends, much less his enemies - he has understood them. Only does this fruit of Love that is “understanding-the-other”, enable forgiveness to be.

And so that becomes our work, our vocation, our call, our purpose. We are divided not by the devil, maybe, but by the natural unfolding of life and God’s designs for creation so that we can come back into conscious union with one another through love. If this is true of our human relations then why not also our relation to all creation. **SLIDE** You could say that in the process of our becoming we had to emerge from the earth and separate ourselves from matter, transcend matter, as conscious, creative, tool-making beings to gain transcendence which over the course of millennia has set us over and against, divided us from nature herself unlike any other creature on this planet but it has also given us our work and that is to come back into conscious union and relation with the earth. Christians, Muslims and Jews together; human animal and inanimate matter together.

I end with one of my favorite quotes from the French Philosopher and Jesuit Priest Teilhard de Chardin who says: **SLIDE:** “Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, [the human] will have discovered fire.”