

“Our Father...” June 21, 2020 – Pastor Donna Doult

Who remembers Tim Russert? For those who don't remember him, he was the longest serving moderator of “Meet the Press” and a real political animal. When he suffered an untimely death in 2008, I wept when I heard the news. Tim was just a common guy, who made it big. But he never forgot where he came from and that he was raised by a hard-working blue-color garbage collecting, delivery-driver father, whom he lovingly referred to as “Big Russ.”

<sup>1</sup>In 2004 Russert penned a best-selling autobiography, “Big Russ and Me,” which chronicled his life growing up in the predominantly Irish-American working-class neighborhood of South Buffalo and his education at Canisius High School. Russert's father Timothy Joseph Russert, "Big Russ", was a World War II veteran who held down two jobs after the war, emphasized the importance of maintaining strong family values, the reverence of faith, and never taking a short cut to reach a goal. Russert claimed to have received over 60,000 letters from people in response to the book, detailing their own experiences with their fathers. He released *Wisdom of Our Fathers: Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons* in 2005, a collection of some of these letters. That book also became a best-seller.

But anyway, Tim spoke so genuinely and loving of his father, I almost felt like I knew the man myself.

I remember reading in the first book that young Tim's job was to take out the trash, and his father always made sure it was tidily wrapped and packaged and set out neatly as a show of respect for the trash man and to make his job easier.

One of things I remember most was this quote from Tim, “The older I get, the smarter my father seems to get.”

I hear you Tim! My own father was one of the “greatest generation” as they are now called. He also worked two jobs. Unlike most of today's fathers, he would *not*

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "Tim Russert." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 8 May. 2020. Web. 15 Jun. 2020.

be caught dead playing with us. The only time he responded to us too much is if we got between him and his TV viewing, or if my mother turned us over to him for some punishment. He wasn't one of those warm, fuzzy dads. In fact, I never remember getting a hug from him. Maybe that's why I'm such a hugger myself today.

He didn't play with us, but was a good teacher. I learned things that have stuck with me all my life, like the trick to doing 9X multiplication, how to make sassafras tea, identify tree leaves, how to fire a gun and skin a squirrel. He was quiet, but he was also much more patient than my mother during driving lessons.

I lost both my parents when they were young, so never got to experience my parents when I was a full-fledged adult. I'm sorry for that. Perhaps we would have appreciated each other more.

But while we're talking about fathers, for those of you who were here last week, you may remember I talked about Abraham and Sarah. We just touched upon the messy faithless episode of Sarah and the slave girl Hagar.

However, our scripture this week expands and explores the story of Hagar and Ishmael, her son by Abraham.

When our story opens this week, we find God's family in the middle of a mess. In order to untangle some of the mess, we need to back up a few chapters, like we did last week.

Remember back in Genesis 12, God had told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation? God had promised him offspring. However, times goes by and nothing happens. Chapters and years roll on, and still Sarah never had a baby. In an act of impatience and power that should disturb us morally, Sarah "gives" her slave-girl Hagar to Abraham in order to bear a child for them. A surrogate mother, if you will. Sarah's plan works, and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael.

It is *AFTER* the birth of Ishmael that God sends messengers to Abraham saying that he *and Sarah* will have a son. (Remember that declaration from last week, when Sarah laughed?) God confirms and clarifies His promise, and Sarah indeed gives birth to Isaac at the beginning of Chapter 21.

But here's where it gets messy and even ugly. Hagar and her son Ishmael have been part of the family for fourteen years now, but Sarah suddenly grows jealous and fearful of them.

Even though *SHE* was the one mistrusted God's promised, tried to take a shortcut, and dragged Hagar into her schemes, she now demands that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out...banished from their home and community.

The story is a sad and dark shadow over the history of God's family. Abraham and Sarah are supposed to be our heroes, pinnacles of faithfulness, yet they not only own Hagar as a slave but abuse and mistreat her and her son.

Our scripture from The Message tells us the story, <sup>2</sup>“Genesis 21:8-21:

<sup>8</sup> The baby (Isaac) grew and was weaned. Abraham threw a big party on the day Isaac was weaned.

<sup>9-10</sup> One day Sarah saw the son that Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, poking fun at her son Isaac. She told Abraham, “Get rid of this slave woman and her son. No child of this slave is going to share inheritance with my son Isaac!”

Verses 11-13 tell us, The matter gave great pain to Abraham—after all, Ishmael was his son. But God spoke to Abraham, “Don't feel badly about the boy and your maid. Do whatever Sarah tells you. Your descendants will come through Isaac. Regarding your maid's son, be assured that I'll also develop a great nation from him—he's your son, too.”

<sup>14-16</sup> Abraham got up early the next morning, got some food together and a canteen of water for Hagar, put them on her back and sent her away with the child. She

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<sup>2</sup> The Message (MSG) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

wandered off into the desert of Beersheba. When the water was gone, she left the child under a shrub and went off, fifty yards or so. She said, “I can’t watch my son die.” As she sat, she broke into sobs.

<sup>17-18</sup> Meanwhile, God heard the boy crying. The angel of God called from Heaven to Hagar, “What’s wrong, Hagar? Don’t be afraid. God has heard the boy and knows the fix he’s in. Up now; go get the boy. Hold him tight. I’m going to make of him a great nation.”

<sup>19</sup> Just then God opened her eyes. She looked. She saw a well of water. She went to it and filled her canteen and gave the boy a long, cool drink.

<sup>20-21</sup> God was on the boy’s side as he grew up. He lived out in the desert and became a skilled archer... and his mother got him a wife from Egypt.

God didn’t make it easy for Abraham, but there are still many lessons to be learned from reading and studying him.

<sup>3</sup>What could be more frightening than being the father of an entire nation? That was the mission God gave Abraham. He was a leader of tremendous faith, passing one of the most difficult tests God ever gave a man: offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham made mistakes when he relied on himself instead of God. Still, he embodied qualities that any father would be wise to develop.

So what are our take-aways from this Genesis story of Abraham and Sarah?

- God wants to use us, in spite of our shortcomings. None of us are perfect, and God knows that. We don’t need to be perfect. Just like your parents who may have bailed you out in your adolescent or teen years, or even later in your life, our Father will even rescue and support us through our foolish mistakes.
- Genuine faith pleases God. All He asks is that you be faithful and live in a way that his own son Jesus did. Remember the Ten Commandments are there to serve as a reminder of the does and don’ts of living as a Christian.

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<sup>3</sup> Zavada, Jack. "9 Famous Fathers in the Bible." Learn Religions, May. 6, 2020, [learnreligions.com/fathers-in-the-bible-701219](https://learnreligions.com/fathers-in-the-bible-701219).

- God's purposes and plans are revealed in phases over a lifetime of obedience. The Abraham story makes that crystal clear. Abraham waivered in his trust, sometimes he didn't do the right thing, but You can't outguess God. Put on your patience. It makes me think of something I hear Judge Judy say frequently, "Don't try to guess where I'm going." God has a plan for you. His eye is on the sparrow. Be still and let Him do His work with and for you.

The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

So, my friends, on this day, when we honor our earthly fathers and father-figures, let's remember to honor "our Father..." the one who IS in heaven. The one who started it all. The one who is always with us. Our Father...who art in heaven....

Amen.