

"We Love to Tell the Story"

Genesis 16:1-15

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!' But Abram said to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' The angel of the Lord also said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.' And the angel of the Lord said to her,

'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;

you shall call him Ishmael,

for the Lord has given heed to your affliction...'

Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

If you haven't had a chance to see the new mural that one of Derek Bettenhausen's students, Hope Hollis, designed and with her classmates and Derek, are working on here in town, you really should do so. It is titled: **"Everyone."**

Seeing the mural reminded me of these words penned by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

While this line is one of the most quoted from the Declaration of Independence, we know "All Men" were not created equal in the minds of the Founding Fathers. "All Men" did not include Native Americans, slaves, women, and non-land holding males.

While Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration included these words in which he argued for the abolishment of chattel slavery: **"He (King George) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither."**

In editing Jefferson's draft, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and a small group of other Founding Fathers, particularly those from the southern colonies, struck Jefferson's words about the abolishment of slavery from the Declaration of Independence because of their **"thoroughgoing embrace of slave-based agriculture and their deeply ingrained racial prejudice...."**
(<https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-s-three-greatest-achievements/the-declaration/>)

"All Men," obviously were not created equal in the eyes of the Founding Fathers.

Of course as noble of an idea as Jefferson's words sounded, it is worth remembering that he was himself a slave owner. He kept one slave named Sally Hemming as his intimate property, forcing himself on her. It is well known, she bore him six children who themselves were kept as slaves by Jefferson.

All men are created equal also did mean all when it came to counting blacks, who were enslaved, when it came to taxation and representation.

As you may recall, when it came to passing the US Constitution in 1787, the 13 newly formed Northern and Southern states, could not agree on how to count the vast number of slaves that lived in our newly formed nation.

Slaves who were considered property by law, when it came to the purpose of taxation or representation in Congress, which was based on population.

In the end, they came up a compromise, counting all slaves as only three-fifths of a human being for both taxation and representation purposes.

While this compromise made it possible for the new constitution to be ratified, it meant that **"All Men"** were far from equal in **"the land of the free,"** a line made famous by Francis Scott Key in what is now our national anthem.

But what is the real story behind our national anthem? The one we don't "love to tell."

In the early morning hours of September 14, 1814, Francis Scott Key sat on a ship in the Baltimore Harbor. After a night of bombardment by British naval ships, watching the American flag being raised over Fort McHenry, he penned a poem known as the "Star-Spangled Banner".

We are familiar with the first verse, especially the line **"the land of the free and the home of the brave"** which in 1931 became our national anthem. However, you may not know that Key's poem had four verses.

While he wrote the famous words **"O'er the land of the free"** which repeats in each verse, Key's words did not ring true in his own life. He owned slaves. In the third verse, he even speaks of killing slaves who had joined a rebellion in their own struggle for freedom, using these words: **"Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution. No refuge could save the hireling and slave From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave..."**

Understanding the whole story of Francis Scott Key's Star-Spangled Banner, which in 1931, turned the first verse into our national anthem, might also help us better understand why United States Olympic Hammer thrower, Gwen Berry, who is a woman of color, recently seem to turn her back when the national anthem was played when she was on the podium to receive a medal at the US Olympic trials.

In responding to the criticism, Berry said: **"If you know your history, you'd know the full song of the national anthem...The third verse speaks about slaves and our blood being slain and pilchered all over the floor. It's disrespectful and it does not speak for Black Americans."**

She makes a very good point. As a woman of color, Berry has pointed out, like others before her, that people of color have been experiencing systemic racism since 1619, when the institution of chattel slavery was introduced in the "land of the free" by white landowning men.

Our nation story is still impacted by the lasting impact of chattel slavery through institutional racism and white supremacy today.

While **"All Men are created equal"** is one of our nation's highest ideals, when you take an honest, critical look at our nation's history, it is easy to see how "We the people" have failed time and again to live into those words.

Our ongoing struggle around those very words, has caused great suffering, pain, oppression, violence and death to those who would challenge us to acknowledge our national sins.

This is at the heart of the debate around what is called "Critical Race Theory" (CRT). According to one source, "Critical race theory is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old. The core idea is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies."

Another more simple way of defining Critical Race Theory is simply an honest telling of our nation's history around the sin of chattel slavery, and the ongoing oppressive treatment of people of color through Jim Crow laws, voter suppression, lynchings, violent and deadly acts like the Tulsa Massacre which claimed the lives of over 200 blacks, the disproportionately higher rate of mass incarceration of black men, and police violence against people of color.

I know, you might be saying, Scott, we did not come here to talk about Critical Race Theory. We just came to share the Bible story we love to tell.

True, we did, and to talk about our own sacred faith story, we have to do so through a critical lens, almost identical to the lens of critical race theory.

We love to tell our faith story, but not all of it. There are simply tales in the whole of scripture we skip over, and in doing so miss their impact on our world history and foreign policy in the Middle East, and in that way, on our own national story.

Earlier, we told the story of Abram and Sarai. Sarai (Sarah) was barren. She could not conceive and give Abraham a child, and more importantly, a son, as a girl really did him no good in passing on his lineage. So, there is the underlying part of the story of male dominance throughout scripture.

Unable to conceive, Sarai, takes her slave girl, named Hagar, and forces her to have intercourse with Abraham. In much the same way as Sally Hemings, Hagar becomes pregnant by Abram. She gives birth to a son, who is named Ishmael.

Sarai feels threatened by Hagar and her son, Ishmael. She treats her harshly, abusing her, and threatening her and her child with death. Hagar, like many slaves, sought her own freedom fleeing with her child. Lost in the wilds, she seeks shelter to protect her child, Abraham's first born.

God hears the cries of Hagar, who sees her and her son for who they really are, two people created in God's own image, equals in God's own eye.

The story we love to tell very often leaves out this part, and instead, it has been told to cast Ishmael and his descendants, who are Muslim, as evil and against God.

Like Critical Race Theory, this story still impacts our nation's economic, social and religious structures today, and our nation's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. It also has had an impact on how we as "Christians" treat our brothers and sisters-in-faith who are Muslim.

Just like us, they too reflect God's sacred image. Abraham had two sons, from two different women, one who was a slave, who had no choice in her sexual relationship with the man who would father her child.

It is with a critical eye that we look through the lens of this Bible story we ought to love to tell, to understand the pain, suffering, violence and killing Christians, Jews, and Muslims have inflicted on each other and still are doing so today.

All "Critical Race Theory," which is being demonized by some politicians and community members, is simply about acknowledging our sins towards God's own global sacred family of which we are all belong.

At the beginning, I mentioned the mural Hope Hollis and her art teacher, Derek Bettenhausen are painting, the one with the four diverse looking young people with the title, "Everyone."

The image of these four young people includes one of a young Muslim woman, and another a young black woman. Underneath where they are standing is the single word "Everyone."

Understanding the image and the message in this beautiful mural is to better understand why we need to help our students and ourselves take a critical and honest look at our nation's history and the role the "Church" has played in systemic racism that is still permeating our economic, political, social and religious institutions and systems.

We hold these truths to be self-evident that "Everyone is created equal" in God's image.

That is what we celebrate this morning in worship as we gather around this welcome table, where we can confess how we have hurt one another, seek forgiveness and mercy, while showing compassion and empathy by making a little more room at God's banquet table for others, who have made room for us.

Amen.