

Last week, I got a text from my Dad. It was a real jewel: two old pictures of my grandpa, affectionately (and somewhat darkly) known as Papaw Doc. All this boot-wearing and y'all-ing and carrying-on didn't come from nowhere. I told ya I was an honest-to-God hillbilly, and there's my patriarch driving horses in a buggy and holding a bag of feed in worn out overalls. I loved showing that picture off, but it came from a place of real tension. I don't have great relationships with most of my family. I grew up with a lot of men that needed love in place of a switch. And as they grew, they had a hard time learning how to be anything more than a switch themselves. Now, don't get me wrong, there's charming stories. Every single one of those fellas could spin a yarn. Handsome and charming, big men with big lives and big expectations. And all of them, in a twist of tragic irony, beloved by their communities and achingly absent from their families. Or when they weren't absent, we'd usually prefer they were. I know some folks are fortunate to have mostly flawless relationships with their families. What's more often the case, though, is that every family has its own messes. Sometimes it's bearable, sometimes not. It's complicated. Family always is. I love my family in a way that brings life and aches in my heart. Sometimes I love the actual people in my family, but sometimes I love the *idea* of big-F Family more. It's complicated. It's so complicated that I can share a picture of an old man and forget for a moment who he was. That's family.

Looking at that passage from Genesis, it's helpful to remember all that. Our family goes a long way back. We've got pictures of Abraham and Sarah, loving parents with children that number the stars, a romantic view of deeply complicated people. In case you didn't catch that story, here's the cliff's notes. Abraham and Sarah can't have kids. God says they will, which makes 'em laugh. But they really want kids, so they go the old fashioned route with a handmaid. That's Hagar. By the rules of the day, Hagar's kid is Abraham's and Sarah's kid. But they couldn't shake the reality that Hagar bore the child. And when Sarah finally did have a kid of her own, she and Abraham decided to get rid of their other child and his mother. Ishmael and Hagar gotta go. Now, our scripture does not say that God told them to do this. It says when God heard about it, God promised to take care of them. And not only that, but to make a great nation out of them. So, Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael and dumped 'em in the desert and went home to live his happy little life. Alone in the wilderness, Hagar knows the end is near. She can't bear to see her child suffer so she lays him in the shade and sits a little ways away. Just far enough that she won't have to watch the dread inevitability arrive. And just as the two teeter on the lip between this world's cruelty and whatever the next one holds, God makes good on the promise. So begins another story told in other pages.

We won't hear anything about Hagar again, and we'll only see Ishmael once more: when he returns to Isaac to bury their father Abraham in silence. But, and here's where things gets real complicated: they remain rooted in their identities of being Sons of Abraham, so much so that three entire religions these many thousands of years later still hold Abraham at our root. It's not that we look back and say Abraham was a flawless fella. Sometimes he's faithful, sometimes he's awful. But in spite of who Abraham is, God's story takes hold. It's amazing to me, actually, that something so beautiful as the religion we call home could find its footing through such complicated people. That's about the biggest miracle I can imagine. Because if I imagine someone like Papaw Doc in place of Abraham, I have a real hard time seeing how we get from him to here. His own children, those who saw him more closely than anyone, flinched at his hand and winced at his greatness. His offspring may not number the stars, but there's plenty to fill a funeral home in silence.

When Jesus comes along, we've got this image of a first century hippie. And I guess he kinda is, but he's a lot more complicated than just that. Once in a while, he surprises us with hard sayings. Today, he says he

comes in order to drive a wedge between families. I've struggled with that line for a long time. Now, I don't think Jesus is anti-family values. But I do think the concept of capital-F Family can be a problem. It's not that you should slough off Family because it's a poisoned idea. It's that sometimes, Family keeps people glued together that cannot survive with each other. I don't mean that metaphorically. Family can be life-giving beyond belief, and it can destroy. When those closest to you misuse their treasured position as a vehicle for power and control, it doesn't matter how much thicker blood is than water. It shouldn't matter when the blood itself becomes poison. Now don't go cutting ties when any ol' argument springs up. But I suspect more commonly than we'd like to admit, the *idea* of Family keeps folks locked in places that are dangerous. Sometimes it gets so bad that we're driven to leave or we're dumped like Hagar in the wilderness with nothing but a sloshing canteen and a heart full of despair. And then what gets real twisted is when Family shoves you to the wilderness and then asks "how could you leave? How could you ever do something so mean to us?"

Down in Little Rock, we did some work with a group called Lucie's Place. It's a homeless shelter for queer kids in the wilderness, kinda like Friends of Dorothy up in Syracuse. When what should've been the safe haven of home becomes a den of hatred and exclusion, kids run away or, more often, get kicked out. Lucie's Place gives 'em somewhere safe to lay their heads. Maybe you've heard of "chosen families?" Chosen Family are the folks you had some say in letting get close to you, especially when your family of origin, the ones you had no say in, failed. Chosen Family lets you decide who fills your heart back up, who you turn to when the world abandons you, and where you go when the wilderness surrounds you. Jesus said he came to set mother against daughter, son against father. I don't think he means that for everyone. I don't think, through Christ, every son will bemoan his father, every daughter hate her mother. But I do think God's ways in this world give us trouble, and choosing to live with the unquenchable and all-embracing love of God becomes a sticking point. If you've never experienced what I'm talking about, count yourself lucky, but don't imagine that because you've never experienced it, it doesn't happen.

When I shared that office with Lucie's Place, I was on the receiving end of a really hateful email. It was more than just nasty words; it was a threat of bodily harm. I didn't want to be cowed by it, so I printed it out and hung it on my office door: what was said in dark anonymity would hang in the light. But that email, y'all. It said I was abandoning the Word of God and putting up stumbling blocks by teaching that God is love and God's love knows no boundaries. It said that I'd somehow gotten myself all confused. You see, they said, what I thought was inclusive was actually exclusive. Somehow all that love and welcome and inclusion actually meant that people who disagreed couldn't come in. Somehow love in that sense was actually hate and saving folks with tenderness was actually damning them to an eternity of suffering. And because of that supposedly true definition of love, I needed to keep my head on a swivel for the love I was gonna get walloped with. My brain spun with the somersaults. See, I happen to think that words mean something. Love means love. The effort to invert love into hate was astounding.

And it brings me back to now. When Jesus says he comes to cause all this division, I don't think it's out of cruelty. When Jesus says he divides, he's saying that, if you actually live into what he teaches, there are going to be those who can't accept it. That love is not exclusion on our part. It is a rejection of love on theirs. Love is such a powerful force that it's terrifying to those filled with hate. That's why it's such a revolutionary thing to say "Love your neighbor. Love your enemy." Love is unbearably generous. Love is frighteningly welcoming. Love is unsettlingly inclusive. When hatred or fear or whatever it is is met with love, you've got options. You can let the love overturn the hate or you can doubledown. And doubling down isn't good for anyone. It's easier at first but it consumes in the end. Hate divides. Hate drives out. Hate destroys. It's not that Jesus splits up families because he doesn't like genealogy. He splits up families because too many people don't know how to handle that kind of transformative love. Or they don't believe in it.

Love refuses to be cast out. Love will not be left to die in the desert. Well, it shouldn't be, at least. Family does what family does. But if it is cast into the desert, love will not meet its end there. Love will save love and breed more love. Perhaps it's love that will number the stars, if we can figure out how to do it. Remember, it's not a hateful man that rescues Hagar and Ishmael. It's a loving God that saves them. And it's a loving God that will save us. Love will not meet its end here. Love will save love and breed more love.