

East Plains, June 21, 2026

Fatherhood, Strength and Dominance

Genesis 21: 8-21; Matthew 10: 24-39; Exodus 20: 12; Luke 14:26

What wisdom or truth can we glean from our lectionary texts this morning? I suggest there is a good deal here to reflect on that is relevant to both Father's Day and Indigenous Sunday.

Our Genesis text speaks of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham is considered the great spiritual father of the people of Israel, but also of Christians and of Muslims. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all called the Abrahamic faiths.

But Abraham, as he appears in this story is certainly no model for fatherhood. There he is, a man of his own time, in a society and culture that allows for a man to have more than one wife, or a wife and a concubine, or a kind of mistress. As a slave, Hagar did not have the status of a full wife.

In our terms, she can be seen as a surrogate mother. Since Sarah after many years of marriage had never become pregnant, at Sarah's suggestion, Hagar, a slave woman, was impregnated by Abraham for the sake of producing the long-awaited child; and she did indeed give birth to their son Ishmael.

A few years later, lo and behold, Sarah was pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. She now became jealous of Hagar and especially of her son, whom she saw as a rival to her son, Isaac. She demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away.

It's a sad story. Abraham and Sarah do not question the injustice of slavery and selfishly exploit this woman for their own purposes. Then they get rid of her when they no longer need her.

Further the dominance of the man is assumed. Even under the influence of his wife, it is he who has authority and power to send Hagar and Ishmael away, and he does so.

It is a horrendous act to send away this woman, and the older son, whom supposedly he loves. But he sends them off potentially to die in the wilderness. He uses his male dominance, as the husband and father, to do this cruel thing.

Traditionally, in almost every society and culture, men have been dominant. Husbands and fathers have been considered stronger and wiser, head of the family, and rightly in charge. And we know that down through history this male power has often been used unfairly, and even with violence.

This is traditional patriarchy, the rule of the father, which is derived from the male's superior physical size and strength, and his function as hunter and warrior, provider and protector.

Well, in our own time, things have changed, haven't they? Though not entirely. Male violence toward women is still common.

But in the last century or so, (or we might say especially the last half century or so) women have gained enormously in social strength and authority. From the right to vote, just about 100 years ago, to becoming a major presence in the professions, and even heads of government, women are often competing successfully with men.

It's called the women's revolution, the most significant social and cultural change in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Now, the Abraham and Sarah story shows what we all know: that women, though they were subordinate, have always had their own kind of power, their own kind of feminine strength and skills. They often knew, very cleverly, how to manipulate their men.

There have always been strong, smart women, even within patriarchy; and there have always been gentle kind men.

Back in the 1950s my father had a sign up in his basement den: "Pa is boss as everyone knows, but what Ma says always goes."

But today women have their own legitimate power. I attended a university graduation the other day. There were more women than men graduating, even in the faculty of science. Gradually women have penetrated the professions, business life, and even politics.

Yes, men still dominate, but there's a crisis among men and boys, many of whom are confused about having lost what they thought was automatically their dominant position in society. Confused, often depressed, about what constitutes their masculinity.

Maybe their girlfriends and potential wives make more money than they do, or more readily find employment.

So men and boys have had to adjust – to learn how to use their masculine strength and skills to serve and not to dominate.

Fatherhood, therefore, in our time, is changing for the better. A young husband and father typically shares domestic work and learns how to change diapers.

And this change, I suggest, fits well with the attitude and teaching of Jesus, who said: "Whoever would be great among you will be your servant."

True strength and authority, then, can no longer be about domination. It has to be about loving service.

Incidentally, speaking of domination, on this Indigenous People's Sunday, we note that, over the last several centuries, white people have dominated the brown and black peoples. White Europeans, because they...we... were more advanced in technology and weaponry, were able to move into the Americas, and Africa and parts of Asia, take over land and resources, and exploit and even enslave the indigenous peoples.

It's a drastic story of arrogant imperialism, from which most of us have benefited.

We are gradually learning that this dominance of the white race over the indigenous has been cruel, and unjust, and destructive of their humanity, and also of our own humanity.

If we turn to our New Testament text, there is so much there to be reflected upon. I can only focus briefly on what seems relevant to family life (since this is Father's Day).

What are we to make of the verses where Jesus declares that he has come "not to bring peace, but a sword?" Isn't this contrary to everything we've ever heard about Jesus, the Prince of Peace?

Is this the same Jesus who speaks constantly about love, about love of God, love of neighbor, love of our enemies? According to Jesus, love is the whole of the law and the prophets. The whole of the will of God for us is summed up by the commandments to love.

Elsewhere in the New Testament we're told that without love we are nothing. The greatest of all the gifts of the Spirit is love!

Now he's telling us to hate, especially members of our family!?

Let's listen again to Matthew 10:35:

"I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law,
and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

We find a similar text in Luke, 14:26:

"Whoever does not hate father and mother,
wife and children, brother and sister,
cannot be my disciple."

Wow! The verse seems to reflect the situation of the early church, where being a Christian was illegal and dangerous. You could end up on a cross or devoured by a lion! You can see how it would divide families.

"You're going to go and be a Christian? You'll get us all in trouble!"

So, to be a Christian, you're going to have to resist and even 'hate' your family members.

Did anybody send their father a Father's Day card today? "Dear father, on this Father's Day, I want to tell you how much I hate you!" I wonder how that would go over.

Surely, he could not have meant this. Specifically, we find texts where Jesus affirms the fifth commandment: "You shall honor your father and your mother." (Exodus 20:12)

We are told that, among the last words that Jesus uttered on the cross, he commended the care of his mother to one of his disciples." "Mother, behold your son."

So what are we to make of these strange words in Matthew 10?

First, we might notice that Jesus does not speak in the measured, balanced tones of a professor. He often speaks dramatically. He speaks with passion. He startles his listeners. He gets their attention.

There's an uncompromising radicality in the words of Jesus.

So surely, this is hyperbole. This is exaggeration. But he's making a point.

Jesus is calling people to join his movement, the movement for the Kingdom of God. To use a modern term, he's campaigning for radical justice and love, hope and freedom. This is what the Kingdom of God is about.

He must have been tired of people making family commitments an excuse for not joining his campaign.

"I would come and follow you Jesus, but my father would never allow it." Or "my wife wouldn't like it," or "I'd come and follow you, Jesus, but I need to spend more time with my kids."

The text challenges us to make choices about our priorities. What comes first? Is it always family commitments? What might it mean to put God first?

I must say that it's hard to imagine how something could be more important than family. But there's one historical example that amazes me.

Remember the story of Anne Frank, the young girl who fled with her Jewish family from Nazi Germany to a hidden place in Amsterdam. She kept a diary, which has become famous. We hear of the several individuals who risked their own lives, and the lives of their families, by assisting this Jewish family with the necessities of life.

They hid them away for months, potentially for years, feeding them, providing them with everything they needed, to avoid the concentration camps and gas chambers.

We know that eventually they were found out; Anne Frank and her family were taken to a concentration camp and died there. And those who assisted them were arrested and imprisoned. They risked everything, including their families!

You could say that it didn't work out. It was too risky. It was impractical. But it was awesome. Humanity at its best!

I have no idea whether I would have the courage to do such a thing. It makes me tremble to think about it.

Surely, though, normally, we love God and follow Jesus in and through our family life. We are called to live justly and generously with our children, or our parents and siblings.

Love for our family members – spouses, children, parents, grandparents, siblings – is of great importance and is affirmed many times in both testament of the Bible.

Tragically, some of us know families where people are decent to the people they work with, and their neighbors in the community, but take their own family members for granted, and treat them shamelessly. They shout at each other, insult and abuse each other.

But our family members are our closest neighbors, whom we are called to love as we love ourselves.

Now, in closing, to link our two texts together: We know that sinners that we are, we are capable of twisting and spoiling any good thing.

It's possible, in family life, to love someone so intensely that we end up dominating them.

Or, like Sarah, who loved her own son so much, that to promote his interests, she was willing to destroy Hagar and her son. It is not uncommon for us to favor the ones we love, unfairly, over others.

It's even possible that by over generosity, we can unconsciously seek to control the ones we love, to encourage them to be dependent. So, yes, there are pitfalls in all our relationships.

At any rate, on Father's Day, or any other day, it's always a good time to lavish affection upon the people close to us. Lots of hugs and kisses are good. We need to find occasion to thank them and let them know we are glad they are in our lives.

Thanks be to God, who has created us in families!

Prayer: Creator of all, we give thanks for our fathers, our mothers, and so many others in whom we take delight, and whom we especially care for, and who care about us. In Christ our Lord, Amen

Hymn: VU 556 "Would You Bless Our Homes and Families"

