

Abraham's Integrity

Abraham, "father" of three great world religions – Jewish, Muslim and Christian – made a tragic decision in a



Michael K. Olmsted

place called Gerar. Keep in mind that Abraham is still learning about God and what it means to live for God. Who among us has not reacted out of fear, self-preservation, uncertainty or a desire for success?

Our society is less about love and morality and more about personal security. For Christians, every day is a school of Christian discipleship.

The story is not unlike a television soap opera. Abraham, with his family and servants, camped in Gerar, between Kadesh and Shur, where there would be ample pasture and water for his herds of sheep and cattle. King Abimelech was impressed by what he saw, including the beautiful Sarah. Abraham says Sarah is his sister and Abimelech takes her into his harem. Such a practice was common in political strategy in that culture. But God appears to the king, telling him Sarah is in fact Abraham's wife and the king is now living in sin. Abimelech declares his innocence and God believes him. Sarah is immediately returned to Abraham, whom God describes as his prophet. When asked why he called Sarah his sister, Abraham says he feared the godless men of Gerar would kill him and take his wife if they knew the truth. The real possibility was that they would take everything!

Where did Abraham get the "sister" idea? Abraham and Sarah shared the same biological father, but not the same mother, so, technically, Sarah was both his half-sister and his wife. Abimelech, who appears to be a man of integrity, returns Sarah to her husband and, in an act of good faith and shrewd politics, gives Abraham generous gifts.

Who is the good guy, the hero of this odd but honest story? All ends with happiness and order. There is the additional insight that in the brief period when Sarah was secluded in Abimelech's harem, all the other women were ill and unable to become

pregnant. In the culture of that day such bareness was seen as a curse from the gods. No wonder Abimelech was so generous!

Bridging this strange story with the topic of evangelism in our day is challenging until you remember that 1 Peter 2:11 describes Christians as "aliens and strangers" in this world. Sometimes Christians act like we are better than the "godless" people around us. Abraham expected Abimelech and his men to be immoral brutes who would plunder and kill. But it turns out the pagan Abimelech hears and heeds God's warning. How can we witness or show the world God's love and grace if we see those outside the church as unreachable or unworthy of God's love? Are we not all unworthy except by God's grace?

I attended a state university, became a head resident assistant (RA) in the men's dorms, served as a student senator, was president of the Inter-Religious Council, edited the literary journal, wrote for the campus paper, and was an officer in the Baptist Student Union. Those and other leadership opportunities opened the door for me to share Christ across the campus. But some of my fellow BSU members were concerned that I had too many friends on campus who were not believers! My response was to explain that we could not share Christ if we spent all our time inside our clubhouse instead of out in the world. As a pastor I always sought ways to be involved in the community outside the church in order to earn the respect of our non-church world and open doors for witness. As the old saying goes: "In the world but not of the world."

I hear complaints that the days of revivals and the powerful preaching of the gospel are over. What I observe is that sharing the love of Christ one-on-one, building relationships, focusing on the hurts and needs of people and ministering outside the walls of the church is the most effective way to invite others to Christ than any witnessing program or a packed stadium.

Witnessing is not meeting a sales quota. People need to understand that God loves and values them, that there is

Formations

January 14, 2018

Scripture: Genesis 20:1-14

a deeply satisfying life of faith, that God cares and is available even in the darkest moments. Abraham found out that Abimelech was not a murderous thief, but a man who had ethical standards and was open to a message from God. The story would have been much different had Abraham trusted God and told the truth from the beginning.

The life of a nomad meant moving constantly to find adequate water and grazing land for flocks and herds. Whether their moves were seasonal or annual they encountered new people and challenges. Sharing your faith can be a brief encounter or a long-time relationship. My profession of faith in Christ came after years of brief encounters and longer friendships until I really understood God loves me.

People need time to think, to learn, to look deep within, a kind of spiritual gestation process that culminates in salvation. We must be patient, consistent, compassionate and speak their language if we are to help them discover Christ. To be a "witness" is the greatest privilege, which we must not reduce to a sales pitch. What if Abraham had begun by establishing respect for and friendship with Abimelech? What if he and Sarah had invited the king to dine with them as they shared their stories of serving God on their journeys? What if they had listened to the king's stories and invited him to worship their God?

What the church of our day needs is the same character every generation of God's people has needed: love, integrity, compassion, generosity and a genuine desire to help others know God's love in Christ. Abraham should have been the hero in this Old Testament story, but instead it was a pagan king who heard God and did what was right. May we learn the timeless lesson that to love God means to love others and share God's love with them.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.