

## March 14, 2021 | Gifts of Women Sunday | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [Genesis 21:8–20](#)

TITLE: **Imposter Syndrome**

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

“In life and in death we belong to God.” So begins denominational creed, “The Brief Statement of Faith,” written to mark the reunification of the two largest Presbyterian Churches in the United States in 1983, creating *US* the PC(USA). These words ooze with relationship: relationship to God, and relationship to one another. Belonging is seemingly unconditional—transcending life and even death. And this belonging isn’t just a choice, invitation or opportunity for the individual. **WE** belong. Belonging happens *together*.

I love this confession of our faith. I love affirming what Paul holds out in his letter to the Romans that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. At the heart of our faith is an affirmation that God’s grasp on us is firm. God has chosen to LOVE the people God made—and God can’t help God’s self. Even when these people turn away, complain, ignore or disobey, God’s grip is firm. God will not let God’s people go.

Yet even as I stand in this pulpit today—a pulpit engraved with the words “Sir, we might see Jesus”—I confess that the “we” part of this creed is a bit more complicated. We is a tricky pronoun. In a world where people are still categorized and stratified, when “We” is spoken from human lips, it often draws lines, limits, and exclusions. We is often used to distinguish who is on the inside and who is destined to be left out.

As we all know too well, the language of our faith has helped people draw these lines. Biblical verses have become known as “texts of terror” because they have been used to define “We” —by creating categories of US and THEM.

Many of us could sit around a campfire and share stories of when we have been the “we” —when we’ve made rules, been recognized, started something bigger than ourselves, or known we were loved. Many of us can tell stories about how our race, gender identity, sexual identity, abilities got us a seat at the proverbial table and signaled to us that we belonged.

Yet many of us—sometimes even the us that has sat in a power seat—can tell stories of when we have been them: marginalized, ignored, decried, or harmed. We may even acknowledge a complicated relationship with the word “belonging.” Enslaved persons “belonged” to slave-owners; girls and women belonged to their fathers and husbands. Belonging meant *being* possessed, not possessing agency, authority, or an opportunity to lead.

As Hagar wanders into the wilderness, she wrestles with the entanglement of belonging. Hagar is defined by belonging. Societally enslaved, she belongs to Sarah, Abraham’s wife. As Sarah’s servant, her value is found in her ability to reproduce—not an heir of

her own, but a child who would be possessed by those who possessed her. Hagar's child would be Abraham's heir. Hagar would mother him on Sarah's behalf, ensuring Sarah's security rather than her own.

Yet, in a misogynist society, any woman's belonging was tied up in men. Sarah's belonging was rooted in her marriage to Abraham—who toyed with her security so many times she was left on shaky ground. As a woman unable to bear a child, let alone a son, she remained at Abraham's mercy, and knew that without Abraham she would belong to no one. Without a man to care for her, she would have no home, no property, no ability to eat. So when Sarah finally gives birth to the son promised by God, Sarah's fears take hold. She recognizes Hagar as an obstacle to her own security and insists that she and her son be sent away. Hagar is victimized again by those who used her, abused her, and then sent her away.

Hagar, suddenly belongs to no one. She is alone in the wilderness with her young son Ishmael with nothing more than a skin of water. She is, literally, marginalized—dismissed, forgotten and cast aside.

Hagar lives the exile that too many know all too well. She lives in a world that tells her that she is dispensable. Her cultural worth is grounded in what others think they can get from her. And when someone with greater worldly power feels that what Hagar has diminishes her own security, she is labeled and discarded by God's own.

We see disturbing trends in this story—trends that continue in our world today:

- A world in which the bodies of women and girls are still objectified and victimized, harassed, assaulted and trafficked for the pleasure of those in power.
- A world in which resources like opportunity, education, housing and even food are not easily available for all moms trying to care for their kids and are often disrupted along lines of race, class, age, ability.
- A world in which disparities are magnified among women along intersectional lines of gender and race, sexual identity, class, ability, religion, and gender identity. For example, “Black women were 91 percent of all transgender and gender non-conforming persons killed by violence.”<sup>1</sup>
- As we mark the one year anniversary of a global pandemic, multiple sources note how this pandemic has disproportionately impacted women—who, according to the United Nations, are 4 times more likely to withdraw from the workforce to care for families than men, and that women provide more than two hours of unpaid domestic labor each day than men.<sup>2</sup>

And frankly we see a disturbing trend that continues in various forms to this day, in which a woman with more cultural power oppresses another woman in order to secure her own self. Sarah centers herself, insisting that her place is only secure if Hagar is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000676>

<sup>2</sup> <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com/pages/covid-19>

pushed further to the margins. This is a pattern that has been adopted by white women, cis women, straight women, rich women...since time began. Sometimes women harm other women.

We live in a broken world—victims of sin, instigators of harm. We need help. We need change. We need to change.

And yet our faith—a faith that has itself been usurped as an instrument for harm—offers hope, assurance that the wounds of the world will not have the final say—not because the world has given up hurting others, but because God is God, and God is LOVE.

In life and in death we belong to God.

Hagar's story isn't determined by her oppressors. Hagar's story continues. God hears her cries and the cries of her son. God makes a way out of no way, providing a well of living water and securing a future for her and her son that exceeded her wildest expectations. Is this promised future perfect? Nope. It plays out in a world where her security is still dependent on her son—a son whom God favors because he is the son of God's beloved Abraham. But in this future, Hagar takes an active role. She nourishes HER son; she raises him right there in the desert; SHE finds him a wife from HER native place. She acts on behalf of herself, her offspring and her future. She is an active agent participating with God to make this promised plan unfold. She matters.

The reality is that we belong too. ALL women—of every race, ethnicity and religious background; with a broad range of abilities, talents and gifts; of all backgrounds, from all neighborhoods and social class. All women have a seat at God's table—trans women and cis women and gender-nonconforming women; gay, bi, straight women. Women belong—whether we work or parent or have attachments to others or not. We belong whether the circumstances of our life affirm this reality or whether those around us tell us lies.

Like Hagar, we can partner with God from the confines, limits, predicaments and possibilities of our own situations and create a way forward. Like Hagar we can cry out when life is overwhelming or unjust—grieving with Tamika Palmer, the mother of Breonna Taylor whose daughter was murdered a year ago, and using our voices and our efforts to work for a more just future where no one's child will be murdered in her own bed. Like Hagar, we can nourish and dream and weave together a future of hope even when the odds are against us.

In life and in death WE belong to God, not because of who we are, but because of who God is. This relationship makes us *US*, reminding us of our inextricable connection, our need for one another, of the fact that we are stronger when we are together. God creates us to be in relationship with one another—as sisters, as advocates, as teachers and healers, as storytellers and entrepreneurs—working together for our shared common good and the well-being of God's world.

May we remember that we belong—even when the messages of our culture, and even the messages of the Church—try to tell us otherwise. May we remember that WE all belong, when we feel compelled to stand on someone else's backs to get ourselves and our own ahead.

In life and in death we belong to God. May we live into this hope, may we honor our connection to one another, may we recognize the full humanity of each of God's children, and may we notice, hear, and follow the women whose voices, efforts, tears and hopes make our world a more just and compassionate world.

In life and in death we belong to God. May it be so.

Amen

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