

Untitled

June 25, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Dr. Monica Maher

Texts: *Genesis 21:8-21*

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Matthew 10:24-39

It's a real joy to be back at First Church! Thank you so much for the warm welcome.

Today, parts of our readings are really provocative. In the first, from Genesis, Hagar is cast out to the wilderness by Abraham and Sarah. And, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." "One's foes will be members of one's own household."

These passages are unsettling, disarming, upsetting our assumptions about what our sacred texts should say. So, what are we to make of them?

Interpretation of Hagar's story marked the birth of womanist theology by the late Dr. Delores Williams, professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Her 1993 book, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk*,¹ now a classic, challenged the limits of feminist theology for not taken seriously the violence of racism and classism in women's lives.

About the same time this book was published, 30 years ago, the first feminist encounter in Honduras took place, which I attended. During a small group exercise, we were asked to do a skit about violence against woman. A young Honduran woman in my group acted out a conflict in which the woman head-of-household, her boss, was yelling at her as she did the laundry, abusing her with words and blows. I thought, wait... this is a feminist space where we discuss male violence toward women; maybe she did not understand the instructions. Yet, in reality, it was I who did not understand. This was her central, very painful experience of violence as a woman, young, brown skin, a domestic worker; this was her experience of racialized class abuse.

This missing piece in mainstream white feminist analysis of classism and racism is what womanist theology holds up.

By placing the experiences and moral perspectives of African American women at the center of Biblical interpretation, Delores Williams read Hagar's story in a new way. She

¹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

affirmed the reality in African American women's lives of what Hagar faced: economic poverty, enslavement, sexual violence, forced motherhood, abandonment, as well as direct revelation from God, key to physical and emotional, survival, both personal and collective.

Did Abraham rape Hagar? Yes. He was her master; consent was impossible. He then threw her out of the house, pregnant with his child.

It's shocking to ponder that a founding father of our faith was a slaveholder and sexual aggressor. And that a founding mother was complicit throughout. What do we do with this?

We use it as the basis to do some major truth telling and soul searching about our own religious tradition, church and family histories. Reckon with these truths and do reparations for centuries of colonial violence and white supremacy.

I know that First Church has been for years on a mission to come to grips with the legacy of slavery within our own church, our city and our nation, in service of building the beloved community through repentance and repair as spiritual journey.

I have been very moved to learn the names of those sisters who came before us, African American sisters in our congregation, whose labor as enslaved women, and whose love of God, whose divine survival strategies, brought us to this place. These were the sisters we had thrown out of the house of our history. The time has come to welcome them back, in our work of repentance and repair. I know last Sunday the liturgy was dedicated to just that. The time has come to recognize and celebrate Hagar, her sisters, and their offspring as a fundamental, beautiful, crucial gift to our religious awakening and our moral salvation.

Thanks to womanist theology, we now acknowledge Hagar with pride and joy as a mother of our faith, look to the religious vision and moral wisdom of African American women who were able to find a way where there was no way.

I don't really remember how we ended that skit at the feminist encounter 30 years ago in Honduras. I only remember how much the young Honduran woman taught me. It was a moment of awakening, a Kairos moment. She pointed out how the education, class and race privilege of some women can minimize, normalize, naturalize and perpetuate the mistreatment of other women. She put an arrow right through my heart, a loving arrow. She never criticized me directly. Through her art, she shared a crystal-clear message, as

did Delores Williams. I have kept the arrow there, so that, though the grace of God, my heart and mind do not close.

The invitation is to find our way to healing and wholeness together, to transform underlying norms and values, symbolic violence and understandings.

How? The prophetic voices of African American women of faith, and others marginalized by race and class and sexuality, can be a great inspiration and guiding force.

Womanist ethicist, Dr. Emilie Townes, retiring Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, encourages us to examine the “fantastic hegemonic imagination”² which affects the way we perceive reality, creates unconscious implicit bias. This fantastic hegemonic imagination is made up of stereotypical categories which distort how we see and interact with others, leads to direct violence, and is in itself symbolic violence.

It takes work to uncover, reveal and uproot such mental and social conditioning. Part of what helps is crossing bridges, stepping into the unknown with vulnerability, building friendships slowly, listening deeply, being intimately challenged, creating new alliances for justice-making.

In Quito, we are working with the Afro-Ecuadorian leader, Rosa Mosquera, who, like Hagar, experienced a divine revelation in a context of racism, classism and sexism. The revelation came in a dream; a woman, Ochún, appeared and told Rosa to open a house in her name. Rosa awoke and wondered: who is Ochún? She soon realized that Ochún is an Orisha of Candomblé, an African religion, and that her African ancestors were calling out to her. Rosa established the House of Ochún Foundation,³ a cultural center for Afro-Ecuadorian women to learn African spirituality through dance, ritual and song, in order to survive in a racist world and to thrive with vital energy. Through the work of the Foundation, Afro-Ecuadorian women embrace their beauty and power as individuals and as a community, and share their gifts with the broader society. They are an amazing collective who inspire others to listen deeply to their own spiritual revelations, to confront and transform the colonial and living legacy of European supremacy in Ecuador.

Similarly, the Afro-Brazilian theologian, Silvia Regina da Lima Silva, Director of the Ecumenical Department of Research⁴ in Costa Rica, Catholic by heritage and Mennonite by marriage, has returned to her Candomblé roots as a daughter of Ochún. She is also an incredible person, whom I met recently in Costa Rica at a regional conference on queer

² Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

³ Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/casaochunfundacion/?locale=es_LA

⁴ Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/DepartamentoEcumenicoDeInvestigaciones>

theology. Her center affirms “radical ecumenism,” a practice of embracing the diverse religious traditions of Latin America which have been destroyed and demonized through European colonization.

At the Ecuadorian Faith Network,⁵ where I serve as Founding Director, we have created a program series on spiritualities in resistance to highlight the voices, perspectives and work of diverse religious and spiritual women leaders in Ecuador. We have featured Rosa Mosquera and the Afro-Ecuadorian religious tradition, as well as Runas Feministas,⁶ an indigenous feminist collective of the Andean spiritual tradition.

Last year in Ecuador, there was a large indigenous strike for better living conditions. People came into the capital of Quito from the Amazon and the Andean highlands, and the urban elite unabashedly unleashed racist anger and hatred in a way that shocked and startled. One wealthy woman, for example, upon seeing indigenous people on their way to the march yelled: “Rats, rats, rats everywhere!” The message was clear: the city does not belong to indigenous people who are the original peoples of the land. Rural, indigenous people provide food to the city and urban residents are totally dependent on their labor, yet the city is not a safe space for them.

The response of indigenous feminists to this rampant racism has been stunning, their spiritual survival strategies honed and passed on from ancestors over centuries. In the words of Samay Cañamar Maldonado, a Kichwa poet and member of the Runas Feminist Collective:

Ritual, spiritual and ancestral practice is part of a way of life of healing, of resistance. This demands a return to ourselves, a call to youth for their survival, for dialogue and resistance through action in the face of hegemonic power, of capitalism which sees our bodies as products and our persons as instant – and does not allow room for the spiritual body which is the heart of matter.⁷

~~~ Knock at my door and let us travel between mountains and white doves. On the way, the black jaguar of the rocks will greet you, you will tell her of the mountain woman you carry inside, the wool cloths of grandmother mountain will cover you, you will come

⁵ Web page: <https://redfe.ec>

⁶ Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/people/Colectiva-Runa-Feminista/100067113112640/?paipv=0&eav=AfYlkg7smF_xY91HWAdTpe_2WeAdfEBAYr0n_U4pA75llk0v9pqrgSDUVL_SNgb4YLY&_rdr

⁷ Cañamar, Samay. “Convivir con la espiritualidad ancestral/Ñukanchik usaykunawan kawsashpa,” *Espiritualidades en Resistencia*, blog *En Movimiento* de Acción Noviolenta de las Américas, 2022, <https://accionnoviolenta.org/convivir-con-la-espiritualidad-ancestral-nukanchik-ushaykunawan-kawsashpa/>.

down with the rain, you will run in the eyes of the water, you will love each scent, texture and color of the wakas.

You will embrace yourself with each woman of the Earth and of spiraled time, with sweet and bitter tastes, you will love and value yourself in every conversation. The shouting from outside will fall into the sacred water, it will go away with the flowers which flow with the river. You will walk with the wisdom of the moon, you will sit around an altar together with your own, your shadows, your desires, your fears. You samay, will return to yourself, to your rhythm, to your time.⁸

Samay and her sisters are brilliant. They have taught me so much.

About 10 years ago soon after arriving in Ecuador, I was co-facilitating a workshop on nonviolence with indigenous women when participants broke into small groups to do skits, again on violence against women. This time, several groups portrayed the robbing of water sources, mourned the disappearance of fresh streams, pure water fonts, places of ritual bathing, a sacred source. Again, I wondered if they had understood the instructions. And again, I realized their understanding of violence towards women was much broader than mine. As members of rural, indigenous communities, they were portraying ecological gender violence. Through participating in their ancestral rituals, ceremonies and lives over these many years, I have come to appreciate more intuitively this interconnection, the non-separation between body territory, land territory, water territory.

This is, in fact, a new expression of feminism in Latin America, called community feminism, which is based on the experience and understanding of body-land territory.⁹ Life in all its multiple forms is at the center. Violence against the earth territory is violence against women's body territory. This feminism represents another paradigm shift.

In light of my experiences with feminism in Honduras and Ecuador, I read the Gospel differently. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Jesus challenges us to wake up from complacency and complicity, and with a sword, cuts through our denials, illusions and ignorance, liberates

⁸ Tsaywa Samay Cañamar Maldonado, *Shunku-yay / Mirarse en la eternidad del corazón* (Siwar Mayu, Ecuador: 2022). Translation from Spanish by Mónica A. Maher.

⁹ See Lorena Cabnal, "Acercamiento a la construcción de la propuesta de pensamiento epistémico de las mujeres indígenas feministas comunitarias de Abya Yala," *Feminista siempre, Feminismos diversos: El feminismo comunitario*, 11-25 (Madrid: Asociación para la Cooperación con el Sur, Acsur-Las Segovias, 2010).

us for the hard work of coalition building for justice, for breaking down the walls of oppression and creating a broader, more beloved community.

Who else have we thrown out of the house? Not considered central to our shared ecclesial life?

Certainly, LGBTIQ+ people have been widely mistreated and continue to be treated with great disdain, purged from churches; entire churches even closed for welcoming them.

It gives me great pride to know that the UCC was part of the state-wide movement here in Massachusetts to legalize same sex marriage, setting the precedent for the rest of the country and a high bar for people of faith.

Our faith does not call us to deny conflict but to face it, to make it visible, to confront and transform injustice. It may seem at times we are creating conflict, or at least escalating conflict; that is often necessary in activism and advocacy to reach a nonviolent solution of just peace.

Womanist and intersectional feminist scriptural scholarship inspires religious resistance and struggles of liberation in the face of relations of domination, colonial, racist, classist, sexist and heterosexist.

In commenting on this Matthew scripture, feminist Biblical scholar, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, warns against the danger of understanding and promoting peace as the pacification of conflict which functions to justify and strengthen systems of domination and subordination. This understanding of peace follows in the tradition of Pax Romana of the first century, an ideology which has profoundly impacted Christian texts and interpretations and whose modern expression is Pax Americana. The Jesus movement challenged this kind of false peace or negative peace, promoting instead struggles of justice to transform systemic injustice: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” The sword of Jesus, symbol of struggle, defies kyriarchal codes of submission within the State, society and the home.¹⁰

Jesus challenged the oppressive household structure of his time, based on domination of the master over women, enslaved people and children. Today, the home continues to be a dangerous place for many women and children. Intrafamily violence, physical, psychological and sexual, is widespread.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “‘I Have Not Come to Bring Peace but a Sword’ (Matthew 10:34): Peacebuilding and the Struggles for Justice,” *Empowering Memory and Movement: Thinking and Writing Across Borders*, 491-511 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

By way of closing, allow me to share two issues around violence against women and children that we are addressing at the Ecuadorian Faith Network. The first has to do with the high levels of sexual violence toward women, and incest toward girls in particular. In 2019, we spoke as faith leaders at the National Congress in favor of a law to decriminalize abortion in the case of rape, the first faith leaders in the history of Ecuador to do so. Every year, almost 2,000 girls in Ecuador aged 10 to 14 become pregnant due to rape;¹¹ over 80% of the preparators come from their closest circle of trusted adults.¹² At the regional and international levels, we are promoting the Girls Not Mothers Campaign which brought the cases of five girls before the United Nations Human Rights Committee in Geneva, girls from Ecuador, Peru and Nicaragua who were forced to become mothers as victims of repeated rape. Aggressors include fathers, a grandfather, a teacher and a priest. The UN Committee has ruled in favor of the girls in the cases it has addressed to date.¹³

Secondly, we have launched a program series on LGBTIQ rights. This has included making public statements to condemn clandestine clinics which operate in Ecuador for the so-called reparation or conversion of lgbtiq+ youth. These ideas and methods for enforced heterosexuality were exported from the US by the now discredited Exodus International Christian ministry,¹⁴ yet continue to operate with strength in Ecuador, taking financial advantage of parents who are desperately seeking help under the misunderstanding that diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are a sinful deviance from divine creation. We have created a podcast for parents, highlighting the voices of two women, one the Catholic mother of a gay son and the other a Protestant mother of a lesbian daughter. Both describe their faith journeys to realizing the sacred beauty of their children's sexual orientations, and embracing them with admiration, appreciation and love.

At the United Church of Ecuador,¹⁵ where I serve as Co-Founder and Senior Minister, we proclaim ourselves as an inclusive and welcoming church which strives to live the radical message of the Gospel. We were the first congregation in the Ecuador to march in Gay Pride, in June 2019, and continue to be the only faith community with a visible presence at the march every year.

¹¹ According to the official statistics of the Ministry of Public Health of Ecuador.

¹² According to the National Women's Coalition of Ecuador-CONAMU.

¹³ See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/06/peru-violated-child-rape-victims-rights-failing-guarantee-access-abortion>

¹⁴ See: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/exodus-international-gay-cure-group-leader-shutting-ministry/story?id=19446752>

¹⁵ Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/iglesiaunidaec/>

It is wonderful to return here to First Church during Pride month in order to return to the roots of this Latin American ministry, feel reinvigorated, re-inspired, renovated and supported to continue the work ahead.

Let us remember the Stonewall leaders who started the movement here in the US 54 years ago, many of whom were Latina and African American women, trans, bisexual and lesbian. Let us also remember and unite today with LGBTIQ movements all over the world, especially in Africa and Latin America.

God is good, and continues to speak.

Listen to these final poetic words of Samay, translated from the original Kichwa:

I am vital energy.

One that grows moving.

*I am strength and confluence. A renewed energy
standing up, and exploding.*

*My life is the spiral of the past, and what comes ahead
tied up by the wisdom of a Condor.*

I am the heart of the wind

that nurtures your vital energy

and makes the tremors of fear, sound gently.

I am like a spiritual song, touching all the memories of the universe.

*I have the beauty of a fresh water spring of quiet mountains
vast and exalted lands, and silence.*

I am young and beautiful.

I go on clothed by the land. Moving on and on.¹⁶

¹⁶ Tsaywa Samay Cañamar Maldonado, *Shunku-yay / Mirarse en la eternidad del corazón*, translated from the Kichwa by Fredy A. Roncalla (Ecuador: Siwar Mayu, 2022). Kichwa to English translations available at:

<http://siwarmayu.com/shunku-yay-looking-at-each-other-through-the-infinite-of-the-heart-tsaywa-samay-canamar-m/>

Yupaichani, Gracias.

