INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Responding to family conflict

Douglas Kindschi *director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

How do we deal with family conflict? How do we deal with conflict in our larger family units, like nations or religious communities? Our religious traditions and scriptures can be helpful.

One of last month's columns discussed "How big is my family?" and the insights of Ted Hiebert, former professor of Old Testament at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. In his book, "The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's Diverse World," he argues that we must go back to Noah as the patriarch from whom we are all descendants and, in so doing, see that from the perspective of Genesis we are all one big family. In a previous chapter he discussed the earlier Genesis story of the Tower of Babel. It is here that we find the Bible's understanding of our desire to affirm our separate cultural identities, but that God's plan is for diversity.

So how do we resolve the conflicts between different individual identities as well as different groups and cultural identities? It is a question of how to handle family conflict. Again, Hiebert suggests we can learn from our scriptures and in particular, from the formative stories in Genesis. His entire career has centered in understanding this book, beginning with his doctorate from Harvard University, throughout his teaching and scholarly career, and his translation of Genesis for the Common English Bible. For Hiebert, studying Genesis is not just understanding an ancient text, but it provides important insights for our life together today.

The story of Hagar and her son Ishmael moved Hiebert emotionally. It is in contrast to much of the story dealing with Abraham, his wife, Sarah, and the birth of Isaac, which is quite straightforward. The narrative of Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl to Sarah, and her banishment to the wilderness of Beer-sheba is filled with the emotions of running out of water to drink, Ishmael suffering from thirst, and Hagar's plea not to have to look upon the death of her child.

The rest of the story Hebrew scripture tells of Abraham's other son, Isaac, who will receive the blessing and become the ancestor of the Jewish people. Yet this other son, Ishmael, is not rejected. God hears the cry of Hagar and responds, "What's wrong? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy's cries over there. Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation." (Genesis 21:17-18)

When Ishmael was born, Hagar had received the promise that he would be the father of multitudes, and when Abraham sent her into the wilderness, God promised that Ishmael would be made a great nation. Hiebert was touched that such a story written by one of Israel's authors "saw others with genuine humanity, that could enter their experience, that could feel their pain, and that could hope for their survival and their future."

While Ishmael is the "other," he is not rejected, but in fact blessed. Genesis 25 tells of Isaac and Ishmael coming together to bury their father, Abraham. It then continues to identify the larger family tree by listing the 12 sons of Ishmael before going on to record Esau and Jacob as the sons of Isaac. The interest in this larger family tree is noted as well when we read that Esau married one of the daughters of Ishmael.

While Genesis recognizes the conflict, especially between Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of Isaac and Ishmael, it does not keep their descendants separate or destroyed. It describes a world where difference is real but recognition of family and kinship relationships continues and both parties thrive. By observing this expanded family tree, we can see that acknowledgment and blessing from God is not exclusive but inclusive.

It is of special interest to note that a similar recognition of this larger family tree is characteristic of the Quran as well. Certainly Ishmael as well as Abraham are recognized as the important ancestors for Muhammad. Islam also recognizes as prophets Adam and Noah prior to the appearance of Abraham. But the Jewish line following from Abraham is also affirmed. The Quran clearly identifies Isaac as well as Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel, as prophets.

The prophet status of other major figures in Hebrew history is also affirmed, including Jacob's son Joseph, as well as Moses and Aaron. Kings of Israel David and Solomon are in the Quran as prophets, as are other major figures such as Job, Jonah and Elijah. Important figures from the Christian Testament, including Zachariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, are also identified in the Quran as prophets and messengers from God. Throughout the Quran there is frequent mention of the Children of Israel as having received God's message.

So both the Bible and the Quran seek to be inclusive in identifying a much larger family tree of those whom God has recognized. Identity of person as well as cultural identity is natural, important, and recognized, but in our various scriptures we see that God has chosen diversity. He has special relationships with certain individuals and peoples, but this does not limit him in terms of whom he chooses to accept and bless.

In the Genesis stories, Hiebert encourages a new and generous way to see difference. He uses the concepts of kinship and family for a framework of relatedness. He writes that it "does not begin with the idea of outsiders and insiders or of exclusion and inclusion. ... The biblical imagination provides a foundation for thinking of others as part of our family, as belonging to our network of relatives, as sharing our common humanity."

Can we, in the challenges of our divisions, seek to see our larger family tree and seek to find ways to affirm and relate to those who seem different? We experience God's love for ourselves and those like us. Can we hope for a God's-eye view of an enlarged affirming love? It is a challenge for our day.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

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