O Lord, make us have perpetual love and reverence for your holy Name, for you never fail to help and govern those whom you have set upon the sure foundation of your lovingkindness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

I joke that having been raised by a child psychiatrist and an elementary school teacher, I was perhaps one of the most manipulated children on earth. For my parents, what was important was not whether I did my chores or not, but instead what was most important in my house growing up was ***how*** I treated someone else. It was that important. and I have tried hard to pass this on to my children. I would want this to be a legacy.

I suppose that my parents didn’t just pull that out from under a hat. There is the whole thing about loving the Lord God with all your heart and then loving you neighbor as yourself all undergirding this message as well. And perhaps that is where we sometimes fail to connect, that for God it *is* that important. God wants to be in relationship with us. God wants us to come to God in our best way possible. It is that important to God how we are, how we act, and that we reciprocate in our relationship with God.

It is telling that the story from Genesis today is NOT really even one about the kingdom of Israel, it is instead about Abraham’s concubine (or sister wife,)—-whatever you want to call Hagar and her son Ishmael. This is about the branch of the tree that becomes Islam, although Muslims profess different importance to Hagar over Sarah and Ishmael over Isaac. And yet, even though this story gives primary centrality to Sarah and Isaac, God is still the care-taker of Hagar and Ishmael; God is still there for her and her son. It is *just* that important that there is provision and that they stay in relationship with God.

Paul’s letter to the Roman’s speaks in language that is truly foreign to us. It’s not as if people have quit “sinning”, but we have quit talking about it so much and so the language feels burden-some. We have the general confession of sin, which we say altogether *en masse* during the Sunday liturgy, but generally we don’t talk much about our individual sins. It might give us better traction if we talk about sin in terms of anything that causes us not to be right with God— anything that alters the relationship with God such that we need somehow to get that affirmation that we are still beloved deep inside us, to know that there is nothing that comes between us and the love of God. Of course, there is a *mea culpa* aspect to this— I am responsible, this IS on me. I did sin, or better put, I did turn away from God. So, of course, just as Paul writes, it would be ludicrous to think that it is somehow okay to sin more in response to the gift of Christ. By no means should we abuse that gift, the gift that through Christ things have been made right. Being baptized into Christ sets us apart, our sins can die. He died to sin, so that we are beloved. It really IS that important— that important to God.

And thus we find ourselves at the Gospel. I remember sometime soon after I got here, a parishioner, who wanted me to understand the Vietnamese congregation better, told me that this particular passage is hard for the Vietnamese parishioners. So hard in fact that it can get in the way of a Vietnamese person wanting to be Christian. The reasons given are not surprising and have in common a shared cultural background with other Asian cultures that have ancestor reverence or worship. The strong importance of the family feels right up firmly against and in conflict with the Gospel that speaks of divisions between parents and children, siblings, etc. For the most part, my experience is that we (Anglo and Vietnamese, and Liberian) can get stuck with that first way of reading this Gospel, but we could go deeper.

First let’s realize that ancient middle-east culture was not very different than Asian culture. In fact, people’s family relationships were very intertwined so much so they were even reflected in the burial practices as branching rooms off a tree into little rooms by relatedness. The importance of remembering ancestors was huge. It was so different from the sometimes estranged relationships of the nuclear family of Western Christianity, particularly in America, can have. It was just as jolting and radical for the people in Israel to hear these words of Jesus for the first time as it may be for you.

So given that, what exactly is going on? Reading it in the context of the verses in its company, we see a few things. Within this Gospel passage is a warning that things will be rough for you following Christ. This is a statement of fact. Still there is an assuredness that God is with you no matter what; you are valued. You are worthy to be protected and treated well. Remember that if you are following Christ in all that you do, then God is ready to stand behind you. God has numbered the hairs on your head.

I don’t think God ever writes anyone off, but there is something to that first commandment. There is a relationship. You are to care about God; God does God’s part to care about you. It is that important. This is the point about potential strife, this is not strife which is promised, but this is potential strife. God is that important. God is more important than your relationships. God is more important than peace. God is not out for war, or in favor of the sword, it’s just that God is more important. If there is division between you and your family because of God, then that is how it must be. Of course you are to honor your parents, but God comes first. It is just that important…how you treat God. It is also just that important that you are beloved by God.

It just IS that important to be in relationship with God. Being in relationship with God is much like my parents’ correction growing up, it matters *how* you act, *how* you are to God. It doesn’t mean it is easy, but God plans on you being beloved.

It’s just that God is more important than anything else. In fact, God is so important that without our desires to honor God first among those we serve - our honor to our families, our ancestors, or any others which we care for—If God isn’t first, then the others will not receive the foundation they need to thrive. Not to honor God first is in the end to honor no one else, —-not our families or our neighbors. On the other hand, when we honor God first, we honor all the others rightly, because we are not higher than the master, and the master, Jesus, is first the one who honors and serves all.