

So...Madison, eight years ago, on my first Sunday at Sardis, the congregation hosted a brunch during the Sunday School hour. I arrived a little early, and I entered the meetinghouse, and I didn't see a soul. It was a ghost town. It turns out, everyone was in the education building, but since I'd only been on this campus once, I had no idea where the education building was. To my relief, I walked a very impressive and very confident eleven-year-old, who promptly turned, looked me over, and said, "You must be Bob. Hello, I'm Madison. Come on, I'll show you where everyone is." This, Madison, was the first of many kindnesses you have shown me. Let me tell you, Madison, that your Sardis family SO appreciates the unique blend of confidence and compassion you exude in this world.

Madison, I'm going to share with you this morning what may feel like several strands of rambling thoughts, but I promise I'll put it all together.

There's symmetry to our gathering this morning. Here I am today, offering a baccalaureate homily – words of encouragement – to a remarkable young woman whose about to embark on a great adventure. And she's the very same person who offered me blessing and encouragement on the very first day of my great adventure. And our text today centers around Abram and Sarai and their great adventure.

We are excited for you, Madison. None of us here can offer you specific details about what your collegiate journey has in store. But I can tell you with certainty that the years ahead will introduce you to ideas, people, and places that will shape and sharpen your core expressions. I am reminded this morning of one of the great thinkers my studies

introduced me to, Karen Armstrong, and particularly a quote from her book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. Armstrong writes:

We can either emphasize those aspects of our traditions, religious or secular, that speak of hatred, exclusion, or suspicion, or work with those that stress the interdependence and equality of all human beings. The choice is ours.

I'm oversimplifying her words, but Armstrong reminds us that compassion is a choice, and a lived discipline. And empathy, for her, is really the ability to have an awareness of the many ecosystems that we occupy. We must recognize that we don't live in a vacuum. And we should work to treat others the way we would want to be treated.

Armstrong also argues that the Golden Rule is the essential component of every major religion, and yet the structures of our world religions have a history, and a long one at that, of doing the very things that are contrary to the Golden Rule.

Earlier this week, Betty Gunz was kind enough to remind me that Flag Day is this Wednesday. We, as Americans, celebrate the anniversary of Betsy Ross' design, and we think about what unites us under a banner of stars and stripes. I believe that a proper way to reflect on Flag Day is to celebrate and acknowledge the rich diversity, the many components that make up our varied ecosystem.

And it's really interesting to me that we also hear about the beginning of Abram's journey. Abram will soon become Abraham, and you know how the song goes: "Father Abraham had many sons (and daughters!), and many sons (and daughters!) had Father Abraham. So let's all praise the Lord!" Praise the Lord, because it seems, God will make of

Abraham's descendants a great nation – Abraham will be blessed in perpetuity, but will also be a blessing to others.

God says, "Come on, I'll show you!" And Abram goes. Right then and there.

Stay with me. Today, we've got a journey. A calling really. And we've got a scholar that tells us to live with compassion and empathy. And we've got a ritual that calls us to celebrate the commonality created under a flag.

There's a temptation to simplify this morning's text. Abram is blessed. Abram is uniquely chosen. Abram is entitled to every spoil. The line of Abram continues. Paul claims that line for Christians. American Christians claim the line, too.

But to interpret the text in this way ignores the idea that God not only blesses Abram, but also makes Abram a blessing for those whom he encounters. God's blessing may start with Abram's family, but it was never meant to be confined to Abram's family, or exclusive to Abram's family. Abram is the beginning of humanity's connection to God, a start, but never, never an end. The blessing is not an ever-condensing circle, but is instead an ever-expansive circle.

And I want to make sure we all hear the meat of this story. God tells a septuagenarian with a barren wife that he's gonna have more descendants than the stars in the sky, that his name will be wrapped up in every generation. I hear in this blessing, I hear in this proclamation, not even the slightest hint of exclusivity. God's telling God's servant that that though his kin may appear small, and ultimately fleeting, that in reality, Abram's gonna have a connection to the whole of humanity. In

other words, God's says, "I'm starting with you, Abram, and I'm not gonna be finished until this blessing reaches everyone."

I'm curious then. The picture God paints is an upside-down funnel. Abram's the narrow end, humanity is the broad end. But why do we keep trying to turn the funnel right-side up? The children of Abram aren't filtered, or sorted, or shrunken. Their blessing doesn't privilege them with chosen-ness, favor, or spoil, but rather calls them to a life of service and love. The tribe, nation, denomination, or religion that uses this passage to justify its privilege, to champion exclusion, to manifest its destiny, misses the entire point. God gives us breath. God gives us value. God gives us meaning. And God uses Abram, and indeed all who follow, as agents of blessing: to give room for others to breathe, too; to affirm the value of neighbors; to elevate, amplify, and strengthen the voices of others.

One final thought. Abram is called by God. He also happens, because of patriarchal structures, to have a whole network of dependents: wives, nephews, cousins, servants, slaves, refugees to name a few. And they will go where he goes, and they won't have much choice in the matter. But they are there. And as modern readers, we ought to acknowledge not only the names and voices we hear, but we ought to be mindful of the ones we don't.

Okay. I've mentioned the various strands, Madison. It's a season of journeys and callings. Our varied faith traditions compel a kind of actualized compassion. We read of a universal blessing in *Genesis*, but humanity keeps working to make that blessing particular. We know we live in a world where too many voices are silenced. And today, you are venturing a little further out into this complicated world of ours.

You are, Madison, just like each of us, called to something. God is working in your life. A first phase of this is being revealed as you head to UNCC. Remember that your blessing/calling is twofold. God is blessing or laying out the path for you to thrive, but God is also imagining the vision of how your thriving – *you being YOU* – will be a blessing to those whom you encounter.

I want to leave you with words from Matthew Paul Turner's *When God Made You*. Turner, I believe, describes you, Madison, and all the hope, admiration, and blessing our congregation has for you:

That you, Madison – God's YOU – will be hopeful and kind, a giver who lives with all heart, soul, and mind.

A dreamer who dreams in big and small themes, one who keeps dreaming in journeys upstream.

A mover, a shaker, a lover nature.

A builder of bridges, you, the peacemaker.

A you who views others as sisters and brothers and lives by three words: love one another.

A confident you, strong and brave too.

You being you is God's dream come true.

Father Abraham and Mother Sarah had many sons and many daughters. And one of them is Madison Kreutzer. So Let's All praise the Lord. Amen.