Can I tell you something, church? I keep messing up. I keep putting my foot in my mouth and showing my ignorance. It’s usually about an assumption I’ve made or a blind spot I still have that causes others’ harm.

Let me get specific. Like many of us in the United States, I grew up in a culture that valued whiteness, straightness, maleness, and having money. In my mind, these were all norms from which everyone else with a different reality deviated.

Even when I embodied that different reality, I saw myself as embodying a difference--female--from the norm--male. When asked why we would choose a certain gender for a character in our short stories, I forthrightly answered my Creative Writing teacher that a normal character would be male and I would need a special reason to write a female character. Some of my classmates agreed. Some of my classmates gasped. It took me years to understand why.

In another classroom, many states and several years away from that moment, I was asked by a group of anti-racist Asian-American teachers and activists to talk about the culture I came from. I said, cheerfully and nonchalantly, that “where I came from everyone was pretty much just normal." This time the gasps in the room got my attention. What was so wrong with saying that everyone who looked like me was normal?

That was a turning point for me on a journey of discovering that to understand one way of being as normal is to understand it as primary and better. To understand one way of being as normal is to plan the whole world in its favor. To understand one way of being as normal is, for people of faith, to ordain it as the natural, God-given order. What I said in both those classrooms without my realizing it, was that male and white were normal and right.
There are so many ways I continue to find myself needing to unlearn what I thought was normal, better, correct, and blessed by God. That unlearning has become something I have been willing to change my life for. Because the more I unlearn the more I see how institutions, even ones I love, like school and church, have in many ways been created to benefit the quote “norm” to the deficit of the rest.

This brings me to today’s scripture story, in which Abraham and Sarah, for the sake of Isaac’s heirship, throw Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. I’m not buying all the writers are selling in this text. My journey of unlearning has taught me that God encourages us to care for one another’s well-being. What I read here is Abraham and Sarah treating Hagar and Ishmael as a means to an end and then disposing of them when they become inconvenient.

They are slaves. Their lives are less than worthy. They are not normal. In my reading, what Abraham and Sarah do in this story is not a worthy prescription for faithful living. Rather, it is, for me, a genuine description of how we humans continue to treat each other and ourselves.

June is Pride month, in which LGBTQ+ people and supporters celebrate all the beauty of loving and living fully out loud, which is made ever more possible by the work of those who have come before. This June has also seen the urgent furtherance of the racial justice movement for our time, on which I hope we will look back and see as one step along the way to a more just future. It doesn’t always happen in the time or in the way we would prefer but I believe God does hear the cries of the wronged parts of our own hearts, our own families, and our own countries and world. Just like God met Hagar in the wilderness and promised her a future more abundant than the past, so I believe God still meets us today.

Let me tell you, my journey of unlearning what is normal has been a journey of abundance for me. For I believe every time I uncover a place in which my ignorance
hides not only do I stop doing as much harm to my neighbor, I also set myself free from the expectations that have weighed so heavily upon me to live up to an unhealthy norm.

I don’t have to be male to preach. There is no normal in the eyes of God. My unique gifts and challenges matter. That means I can be honest, fearless, and free to live as faithfully and as fully as I can.

For I believe, if we can think of God as a parent, God is the kind of parent who wants each child to live ever more into the fullness and rich gifts each one has been given. God is the kind of parent who longs for the well-being of each child. God is the kind of parent who calls us to be a family for each other, one far more numerous than the stars, in which we may unlearn our ignorance and live honestly, fearlessly, and free.

May it be so. Amen.