

Title: Approaching Marriage

Date: 7/9/2023 (Proper 9, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

Video Link: https://youtu.be/G5jq8_CxvhM?t=1279

Let us pray again this portion of the opening collect:
O God, grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart,
and united to one another with pure affection.¹
Amen.

It will likely not come as a shock to you that the topic of marriage has been on my mind.

When you plan to get married in an Episcopal church or by an Episcopal priest, part of the deal is that you have to have these pre-marital conversations. That can sound kind of intimidating, both to the couples AND to the priest celebrating the wedding. But at the end of the day, these conversations are all about making sure that the couples has talked about topics that will affect their married life- their families of origin, the role that faith and God will play in their lives, and the ever popular sermon topics of children, sex, and money.

That's a lot to cover, and this isn't about nailing down every single detail. This isn't about the priest digging for dirt or juicy details, nor is this about the priest solving their problems; there are people who specialize in that. This is about making sure that the couple can and are talking about things that can feel hard or awkward to talk about, that they're developing a framework for these conversations.

This is about identifying their pain points and growing edges, as individuals and a couple. This is about intention and communication.
Is there clarity? Are they on the same page? What does love mean to each of them, what does it feel like, taste like, look like? What's their approach to marriage?

This is important because marriage means different things to different people. There have been different understandings and expectations of what marriage means and what it is for, not just over time, but even in a single story from a long long time ago.

These last weeks, we've heard about Abraham and Sarah, and Sarah's slave Hagar, and their children Ishmael and Isaac. This week, we move onto the next generation. Sarah has died, and Abraham is anxious to get Isaac married so he can have those descendants that God promised him. To keep it all in the family, if you will, he sends his oldest servant back to his family of origin. Interestingly, he is very clear that he doesn't want his son to go back, that his son **must not** go back there. But his son's *wife* must come from there.

Over time, this has been interpreted as a rule against taking foreign wives, against marrying people of different backgrounds or ethnicities. But maybe Abraham just wants to find Isaac a wife that reminds them of Sarah. She's the model they have in mind, and since Sarah was Abraham's half-sister (Gen 20:12), it kind of makes sense that Abraham literally sends his servant to his relatives to find a wife for his son. That seems to work out, at least at the end of today's passage. Isaac moves Rebekah into Sarah's tent, and he loved her, and in this way, he was comforted after his mother's death.

This is the approach that Abraham, and by extension Isaac, are taking toward marriage.

The servant takes another approach. Instead of going straight to Abraham's family, he parks himself and ten camels by a well. Then he prays to God and basically says, "Ok, God. I'm going to stand here and ask these women for a little bit of water from their jars. I'll know which woman is the one for Isaac when she offers water to me AND my camels."

One of the commentaries on this passage points out that a thirsty camel can drink up to thirty gallons in ten minutes. Assuming that the camels aren't completely dehydrated, this works out to be 100-200 gallons of water.² She'd have to spend a LOT of time at the spring to fill up that many jars of water.

Making this offer speaks to her strength and character.

- A woman who makes this offer is a woman who is not afraid of work.
- A woman who makes this offer is a woman who takes initiative, who won't wait passively for Isaac to come out of his shell.
- A woman who makes this offer to a servant, a man who is a slave in her eyes, might be a woman of extraordinary kindness and generosity of spirit.

The servant could have asked for any kind of sign, but **this** was the sign he asked for. He could have asked other people at the well for some gossip so he could find out who was most likely to say yes to going far away.

He could have led with the fancy gifts he brought and tried to entice someone to go with him. But he didn't. He didn't want someone who was desperate to leave; he didn't want to appeal to someone's greed. That's not the kind of woman he wants as the mistress of his household.

Sarah showed a mean streak when it came to her slave Hagar. Perhaps he hoped that this marriage would bring a different kind of influence into their lives. That was his approach to making this match.

And by the time the camels finished drinking, he asks Rebekah if there's room in her father's house for him and the camels and his fellow servants. He's ready to make his offer.

She brings him back to the house, and when her brother Laban hears the story and sees the ring and bracelets of gold on her, he rushes to greet the servant. This says a lot about Laban's approach to marriage. If we're being kind, we'd say that he's practical. He just

wants to know that his sister will be well cared for. AND it probably doesn't hurt that he and his mother received costly ornaments as the bride price for Rebekah.

His approach has the feel of a business transaction; it's about what's good for him. Later on, we definitely see these values in play when Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah, comes to Laban seeking a wife. Spoiler alert, Laban tricks him into providing a total of fourteen years of free labor in exchange for his two daughters.

And what about Rebekah?

The way today's reading is edited, it looks like she says yes to marrying Isaac. But no one actually asks her what she wants until the servant wants to take her back to Isaac right away and her family wants her to stay another ten days. Her "yes" is a yes to leaving right away.

As they approach their destination, we have this scene out of a romantic comedy. As the day ends, Isaac is walking, meditating, praying. He sees the outline of camels against the evening light, an answer to his prayers. When Rebekah sees him, she slips quickly from the camel. As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg explains, the Hebrew word used here actually means "fall"; Rebekah literally falls off the camel.³

She would not be the first clumsy woman in a RomCom; in the Wedding Planner Jennifer Lopez gets her heels stuck in the street and has to be rescued by Matthew McConaughey, in Miss Congeniality, Sandra Bullock the tomboy goes undercover as a beauty queen and trips in her heels but Benjamin Bratt still looks at her admiringly.⁴ I could go on, but trust me, this is a thing.

After she literally falls for Isaac, she takes a scarf and covers herself. According to Rabbi Ruttenberg, the usual explanation is that this is an act of womanly modesty. But she prefers the reading that compares this moment to Moses' fear of looking at the burning bush because in this moment Rebekah experiences something holy and awe-inspiring, or to Moses putting on a veil after he spends some time with God on Mount Sinai so that other people will not be overwhelmed by the divine glory that shines from him by association.

We don't know how she feels, but we see this physical reaction to something important, something big, something holy and sacred.⁵ We can do a better job of talking about the body in church, in a healthy and lifegiving way, as an important part of our spiritual life, not something to be cast out or denied. But what if our physical senses, what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, point to the sense of wonder and delight, the sense of vitality and aliveness that genuine love and loving can bring into our lives?

This single story from Genesis contains so many approaches to marriage. Abraham, Isaac, the servant, Laban, Rebekah, they all have different expectations of what this means to them. That's a lot to negotiate just in a single family. Yet there are people who cling to all these expectations of what a "normal" marriage should look like and try to impose them on other people, even though Adam and Eve are hardly the best role

models and the lives of these patriarchs show us that there is not one single way to be married or even be family.

When Jesus talks about taking on his yoke, one way to think about that is to follow him to love as he did. This is not the kind of love that makes us weary, this is not the kind of loving that feels like a heavy burden. This doesn't mean that we don't have responsibilities to those we love, or that people in love can't disagree or fight. Humans are complicated, and so are our relationships. But the love of Jesus keeps us focused on what's important.

And sin? Sin twists our understanding. Sin can turn something good into something bad, into something that separates us from God and keeps us from fully loving our neighbors.

When we talk about sin, this is not about the body vs the mind, the flesh vs the spirit, the physical vs the spiritual understanding of Scripture. Sin corrupts the law when we make idols of the law, when we become slaves to the letter of the law, when we worship the law in such a way that we end up losing sight of God.

Think about how people idealize marriage or family, or a certain way of being married or a certain way of being family, that it leads them to act out of fear and hate rather than love. Jesus reminds us that our baptism makes us children of God and part of the family of Christ. Marriage and children don't have to be the goal; we can be a living sign of our loving God in so many different ways.

So, may we learn to be gentle and humble in heart when it comes to expressing our understanding of marriage and family. May we be gentle and humble in how we feel and what we say AND also in what we do, so that we may find rest in our souls, so that all may find rest in their souls. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ for this yoke and for easing all our burdens!

Amen!

¹ http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html#ps3

² Tull, P. (2011). [Exegetical Perspective \(Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67\)](#). In *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays* (Vol. 3, p. 2). Westminster John Knox Press.

³ <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/love-and-the-holy>

⁴ <https://www.vh1.com/news/1azi87/clumsy-romantic-moments>

⁵ <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/love-and-the-holy>