

Winning at Marriage and Relationships

2nd Weekend after the Epiphany – January 14/15, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Genesis 24:57-67 (NRSV)

[A servant has gone to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's son. The servant meets Rebekah at a well and determines that she is the girl that the LORD has sent him to find. Her family agrees but, before sending her with the servant, asks Rebekah whether she is willing to go.]

⁵⁷They said, "We will call the girl, and ask her." ⁵⁸And they called Rebekah, and said to her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will." ⁵⁹So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. ⁶⁰And they blessed Rebekah and said to her,

"May you, our sister, become
thousands of myriads;
may your offspring gain possession
of the gates of their foes."

⁶¹Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

⁶²Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. ⁶³Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. ⁶⁴And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, ⁶⁵and said to the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. ⁶⁶And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. ⁶⁷Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

What could this story of a man and a woman from nearly 4,000 years ago have to say to us about marriage and relationships? More than we think.¹

Last fall, I taught a class on Genesis for the first time. I remember being very surprised from time to time as the story unfolded. This story provided one of those occasions. Asking Rebekah's permission to promise her in marriage? That didn't exactly fit my stereotype of this ancient patriarchal culture. Meeting, marrying, and loving . . . in that order! Isn't love just a feeling that hits us out of nowhere? Is it really possible to learn to love someone . . . or to re-learn?

Seeing the story

If you are reading *Thru the Bible* with us, I'm sure you've been struck by the pace of the story in Genesis. This week's readings took us from the birth of Ishmael and Isaac, through the stories of Esau and Jacob, to the births of Jacob's twelve sons to Leah, Rachel, and others! God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son long-promised by God. Jacob wrestles with God before his meeting with Esau. It is pretty hard to know what to make of all this. Study Bibles and commentaries are helpful, but they certainly don't answer all our questions, some of which are simply unanswerable. So, what do we do?

First, we can try to keep our eyes on the larger story. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve sons. The larger story here is about the emergence of a unified Israel consisting of twelve tribes. All this out of God's covenant with one man, Abraham. Why Abraham? Why Isaac? Why Jacob and not Esau? We can't really know. These were God's choices. The stories of these people are certainly not all examples of righteous living. These people are flawed and troubled. They struggle with their lives and relationships. We can certainly see something of ourselves in these stories. Yet, through it all, God's purposes move forward. God will have a people whom he will save, not just for their sake but for the sake of the whole world.

Second, we can pay attention to the particular stories told about the patriarchs and their families to see what we might learn about ourselves, about God, and about the people of God. So, let's take a look at today's story.

¹Last year at this time, we were working through a five-part series on marriage, "Loving for Life." Those Background Studies are all posted on-line at www.standrewccl.org. Just go to the Sermon Background Studies page and scroll down to the January 2005 studies.

After Sarah's death, Abraham knows that the time has come for Isaac to marry, as the covenant must be passed from generation to generation. After all, Isaac is forty! Abraham wants Isaac to marry from among Abraham's people, his extended family. So he sends a trusted servant northward to Haran to find a suitable wife. When the servant arrives, he prays that God will give him a sign that he has found the right girl. At a well, the servant meets a young woman, Rebekah, who is kind, generous, and hard working. Rebekah takes the servant to meet her family, who quickly concludes that it is God's wish that Rebekah return to marry Isaac. The servant is ready to leave immediately, but the family asks for ten days to say their good-byes. Then comes the surprising part, at least to me. The family asks Rebekah if she is willing to go to a new land and marry a stranger. She is. Rebekah will continue the faithful response of Abraham by leaving her home and heading out. When the servant and Rebekah arrive, we are told, Isaac made her his wife and loved her, finding in Rebekah comfort for the loss of his mother.

The Sacrifice of Isaac

If there is a more puzzling, important, and disturbing story in Scripture, I don't know what it is.

God tells Abraham that he is to take his son, Isaac, and sacrifice him . . . literally. The first thing to notice is that Abraham doesn't protest. Abraham trusts God, but he also lives in a world in which human sacrifice is common. Perhaps he simply isn't surprised that God would ask this of him. Remember, Abraham does not know God as we know God.

Still, one telling detail is that when Abraham heads off with the boy to make the sacrifice, he tells the servants that "we" will return from the mountain. Does Abraham trust that God will somehow provide? Abraham does not have a crystal ball, but he does trust in God's covenant faithfulness.

We might also notice that Isaac, who is perhaps twelve, is not a passive participant in this. He willingly lies down on the altar. In whom does Isaac trust? His father? His God?

In the end, the way out is a substitutionary sacrifice provided by God. Abraham had told Isaac that God himself would provide the lamb for the burnt offering (22:8). After God tells Abraham that he is not to kill Isaac, Abraham sacrifices a ram who is caught in a nearby thicket. This story is the first of three key Old Testament passages re lambs. The second is the Passover lamb at the Exodus. The third is the lamb led to slaughter in Isaiah 53. All three are carried over to Jesus, as in John 1:29: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

God began the story as the *tester* and finished it as the *provider*. But still, why would God ask such a thing of Abraham? Is it really a straight-forward test? It seems needlessly cruel. What sort of God would do this?

Only the book of Job has a test as severe and difficult as this one. It is probably best to avoid taking too easy a way out of this story. Perhaps this story asks us the same question asked of Job . . . and of Abraham. Will we trust God even when it seems too hard?

Asking

The story of Rebekah tells us something important about the cultivation of our relationships with those we love. Simply put, it is important to ask. In a patriarchal culture quite foreign to our own, the family respects and loves Rebekah enough to ask her whether she wants to go. They even believe that this is all God's doing. But still, they ask. No demands. No assumptions. Given that Rebekah is unmarried, it is very likely that she is quite young, a teenager. Yet they ask her. They would not take her for granted.

One would think this is how we would treat all those we love. But sadly, we too often treat those we love in ways that we would never treat a casual acquaintance. We take our spouses for granted. We assume we know what our teenagers or parents want and care about. In one of the many stories about Texas' win in the Rose bowl (yes, I've read them all), Mack Brown said that things began to turn around for him at Texas when he decided "to spend more time asking kids about kids." Who'd guess so much could come from just asking.

Loving

Today's story also reminds us that love is something we do, not just something we feel. Rebekah is delivered to Isaac and he marries her. No romance. No courtship. He marries her and he loves her. Scripture doesn't give us many insights into their marriage. We know that it took twenty years for Rebekah to conceive, twenty years of waiting for an heir to the covenant. We know that Isaac stayed with Rebekah even after she conspired with Jacob to steal the blessing that Isaac intended for Esau.

The story reminds us that our loving relationships cannot be measured only by feelings. Even if we don't feel about our spouse the way we once did or the way we'd like to, will we still care for and about our spouse? Will we still forgive? Will we still ask, rather than demand? One of the things I think I've figured out about marriage and other important relationships is this. Doing the things I'd do if I felt the way I want to feel often leads to the feelings I seek. Yes . . . we can re-learn love.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

January 15 - 21

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Genesis 37-39; Psalm 13 We meet Jacob's most beloved son, Joseph. He is sold into slavery by his brothers.</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 40-42; Psalm 14 Joseph uses his God-given power to interpret dreams to be freed from prison and rise to power.</p>
<p>Day 3 Genesis 43-46; Psalm 15 Joseph's family have made their way to Egypt to avoid the famine. Joseph brings all of his family to resettle in Egypt, including Jacob.</p>	<p>Day 4 Genesis 47-50; Psalm 16 Jacob bestows his last blessings and dies. Joseph forgives his brothers. God's people settle into their lives in Egypt. They will be there for hundreds of years.</p>
<p>Day 5 Mark 1-3; Psalm 17 Mark plunges us right into Jesus' adult ministry. Note the pace at which the action moves. Jesus' actions are often the enactment of God's kingdom.</p>	<p>Day 6 Mark 4-6; Psalm 18:1-24 Jesus teaches in parables. He restores life to a young girl. He feeds 5,000 and walks on water. What themes do you find in these stories?</p>
<p>Day 7 - Reflection</p>	

Sermon Notes

January Book Recommendation

Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt, by Anne Rice

Anne Rice is brave if nothing else. This is the story of Jesus at eight – as told by Jesus! I enjoy Anne Rice’s writing, but I came to the novel pretty skeptical. To my surprise, I very much enjoyed it. She makes no bones about being a devout Christian and lays out her approach to the historical research in an appendix. She found her way to some reliable New Testament scholars, notably N.T. Wright. She does a good job of giving you a sense of what it was like in Judea and Galilee in Jesus’ day. But the parts I liked best were the interiors – what was going on in Jesus’ mind as a young boy. Ms. Rice is Catholic so she has to account for the Catholic belief in Mary’s perpetual virginity. She also moves a few events and dates around to suit her purposes. But don’t let all that put you off. This novel will certainly give you much to ponder and discuss.

Winter Bible Academy has begun but it is not too late to start. You can still register on-line at www.standrewccl.org and www.standrewumc.org

or . . . you can just show up. You will be welcomed!

Classes include *The Practice of Meditation* (Tues. evenings with Rev. Kathryn Self), *Introducing the Old Testament* (Mon. evenings with Scott Engle), *Confronting the Controversies* (Thurs. lunch with Rev. Doug Meyer), *The God Who Saves: Exodus and New Exodus* (Mon. mornings and Tues. evenings, with Scott Engle), and *1 Corinthians: By the Grace of God* (Thurs. mornings with Frankey Commer)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In his commentary on Genesis in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Terence Freithem writes, “Regarding v. 67, we must say more than that a new generation is appearing, or even that God’s promises of posterity through Isaac can now be realized. Isaac loves Rebekah! Life in God’s good creation involves more than divine promises and religious practice; it includes such creational gifts as the love between husband and wife.” Love as a creational gift. In what ways does this differ from our society’s understanding of love? How do these differences play out in the day-to-day living of a marriage? Of a family? In our friendships?

In the Old Testament, understandings of true love are built upon faithfulness and steadfastness. God loves his people; he is faithful and steadfast toward them in all things. This should also characterize our human relationships. Being steadfast and faithful are about the “doing” of love more than the “feeling” of love. God’s gift of creational love begins not in romance but in commitment. Isaac married Rebekah and he loved her. Could it be that the commitment creates the love? Perhaps this is easiest to see in our families. I can think of a few family members I’ve had to learn to love.

Marriage is different. Though it was not this way for most of human history, our marriages are born out of romance. Thus, the challenge for many marriages is what to do when the romance begins to fade. Do we allow the marriage to fade away? Do we look outside the marriage for the feelings we so value? I assert in the study that the doing of love can lead, or lead back, to the feeling of love? Do you think that I’m right in this? Have you experienced anything like this in your own life? Why do we marry at all?