

“Dancing for the Rest of Us”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Imagine you are walking through a Middle Eastern bazaar. The marketplace is abuzz with life, as people present their best items for sale, much as it has been for thousands of years: baskets and bread, fabric, fruit, and fish, sandals and satchels. Lyrical voices rise between the stalls, as sellers display their goods and shoppers negotiate prices. Darting between the vendors are the children of the marketplace, some who are family to the sellers, and some who are the offspring of the customers. As the children play their games of tag and hide and go seek, they take advantage of the endless possibilities of nooks and crannies to hide, and to reveal themselves. They know the fearfulness of what it means to be lost, and they know the delight in being found, and dancing between the two— lost and found— in the context of a shared game has a childish wisdom to it, about what joy it is to be found before God.

How quickly we forget the wisdom of childhood. But Jesus remembered, and he also noticed that children always invite others to take part in what they are doing. Will we join them? In his short parable of the marketplace, Jesus said, “This generation is like children sitting in the marketplace, calling out: ‘We played flute for you, but you did not dance!’ ‘We wailed, and you did not mourn!’” Jesus compared this invitation and response to our reluctance to follow those God sends to show us the way: Children; John the Baptist; Jesus. When John the Baptist asks us to get serious about the day of the Lord, he himself abstained from food and lived an austere, wilderness life in preparation for that coming. But the people complained: “He’s a demon, and besides that, he’s no fun at parties!” Jesus tried another approach to tell people about God: he ate and drank, even with sinners, and when the food or drink at the party ran dry, his miracles would bubble forth more. But the people called him “a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” I wonder what other ways God has tried to woo us— to draw our attention to join in the divine dance, but it seems God just can’t win; for every invitation given to us, we have yucked God’s yum.

I wonder, does God ever feel lost? Does God wonder, “when will I get to share in the delight of being found?”

The gospel passage gets placed today in our lectionary readings with some erotic love poetry from Song of Solomon— check it out, we didn’t read it, it’s only 8 chapters so you can read the whole book one night instead of Netflix and chill— and the betrothal scene that sets up the marriage of Abraham’s son Isaac, to Rebekah. Like so many love stories in the bible, it takes place at a well. Here we find another kind of invitation, and an enthusiastic “yes” from Rebekah to what is offered.

Recently I attended a party and somehow the conversation shifted to the topic of how couples meet. For those who had married, people shared their secrets for finding their partner: “Plenty of Fish,” said one woman, referring to the online dating app where she found her husband. Another had been introduced through mutual friends. “Didn’t you and Jay meet in a bar?” Chris asked Josephine, who was at our table— and her mother-in-law, who was sitting there with us. Josephine immediately hopped up to grab a drink; apparently, we later learned, Jay had told his mother years back a different version of how he met the woman he would marry.

Isaac and Rebekah became betrothed to one another long, long before online dating apps, and at another kind of watering hole. There is no *one* marriage custom in the bible, so please don’t talk to me about what “biblical marriage” even means: Concubines? Marrying cousins? Multiple spouses? Being obligated to marry your dead brother’s widow? Try designing a wedding website for *that*. Perhaps a biblical arranged marriage is too transactional to be romantic for most of us in Western culture, who prefer to find love first, and then commitment; an arranged marriage starts with commitment, and with luck, love can form.

The watering hole where Isaac and Rebekah’s future was sealed was at a well. Abraham’s lead servant Eliezer had traveled from the land of Canaan, which Abraham had settled, to go all the way into his boss’s ancestral home in Mesopotamia— about 600 miles, in search of a fitting bride for his boss’s son. At the wellspring, where he stopped to rest, Rebekah came and granted him a drink of water, and offered also to draw water for all 10 of the camels.

This act of hospitality went above and beyond the societal requirement for hospitality, which was already pretty high. It showed that while Isaac, through his father Abraham, had the wealth of multiple camels, servants, gold and jewels, and even the covenant through God that would grant him a land and a nation, what Rebekah was something just as powerful and necessary. She brought a power that bubbled up in ways that would bring sustenance to a growing nation. You will later find Rebekah to have wisdom and wit— with a bit of trickery— and these show in her choices to help the survival of a new nation. Even though Rebekah *does not yet know* the God with whom Abraham has brokered a covenant, she steps into the crossroads of faith and family, and without her it may have never even happened.

And so, Rebekah joined the dance with Isaac, and they in turn danced with God.

But what about the rest of us? How can we know when God is calling us to dance, and when God is calling us to weep? How will we know whether to extend a welcome to sinners and tax collectors and eat and drink with them at parties, and when to live in simplicity and inspire righteousness, with a focused zeal for God— as John taught?

I suspect these two aren’t as mutually exclusive as we make them to be. But I also recognize that it can be a big question: How can I know whether I am following Jesus’ call in my life? How can I know if Jesus has offered me an invitation to join in following what he is doing? Certainly we have each seen examples of people doing what they are convinced that God has called

them to do, but it is pretty obvious to us that they have missed the mark of what it means to follow God. We may observe how *grossly* wrong someone else can be and the harm they can do to others— but then realize in a moment of humility, “I could be wrong, too.”

Maybe love worked out for Rebekah and Isaac, but I know there are people in our church whose marriages let them down in big and small ways. There are those who regret the pathway they took with their career, or simply the choice whether to drive or take the bus to work on a day when traffic was bad. Somebody here knows the regret that they heard flute music but never danced, that they lost their loved one and still haven’t been able to weep.

I have a word of hope for you who harbor regrets on the choices you made, or are still wondering whether you made the right choices. For you who question, am I following Jesus’ call? Is Jesus happy with me?

My word of hope is this: I don’t think you are asking the right question. Jesus said, “Come to me.” He said it to the sinner, the tax collector. He said it to the Pharisee, and to Peter as he trembled, sinking on the water. These aren’t necessarily people who were the ideal of faith. He was less concerned with who was on the “right” path, than he was interested in who would join on a pathway *with him*.

“My yoke is even, and my burden is light, and you will find rest for your souls.” Barbara Brown Taylor notes that there were two types of yokes used in Jesus’ time: a single yoke, and a shared yoke. A single yoke can certainly help carry heavy loads: water jugs being one of them. But a shared yoke could allow two creatures to work all day, doing exponentially more lifting than two who are separately wearing a single yoke. This is because with a shared yoke, when one gets tired, the other creature can carry the load for a bit, and allow the tired one to get some rest until they are able to work again. At the end of the day, both may be tired, but neither is exhausted.

Taylor describes, “Plenty of us labor under the illusion that are yokes are single ones, that we have got to go it alone, that the only way to please God is to load ourselves down with heavy requirements— good deeds, pure thoughts, blameless lives, perfect obedience— all those rules we make and break and make and break, while all the time Jesus is standing right there in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us, a yoke that requires no more than that we step into it and become part of a team.”¹

No matter how lost we may feel before God and the ways of Christ, know that Jesus is always seeking us. Like Abraham, who sent Eliezer 600 miles to find Isaac a bride, Jesus is going through extraordinary lengths to find us and invite us into the dance. We may be humble in what we have to offer: I was never the one to take up the center of a dance floor with impressive moves; I was happy just not to step on my wife’s feet at our wedding dance. But what we can bring is necessary, and even powerful, for what Jesus is trying to do in the world. Each time we think we may have an invitation from Jesus, we don’t need to consider whether it will make us rich; although Rebekah was probably made wealthy from Isaac’s proposal, following in the ways

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*.

of Jesus has no guarantees to make us richer and may in fact make us poorer if we become as generous as Jesus suggests. We don't need to consider how far it will take us; though Rebekah would have journeyed weeks from her hometown to settle into the life of a matriarch in Canaan, where Jesus is calling us might be as close . We need only to ask, "Will this help me to love God and love my neighbor better?" We can also ask, "Will this give me some rest for my weary soul?"