

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 24: 1-4; 10-25; 32-33; 42-45; 50-58; 61-67
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 7:15-20
July 9, 2023

“Matchmaker”

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When Abraham was very old, he said to the senior servant of his household, “Put your hand under my thigh.” **Wait a minute.** What? The servant was being asked to take an oath, and to swear by the Lord that he will not get a wife for his son Isaac among the Canaanites, but will go back to Abraham’s country and relatives and find a bride for her there. Fair enough, but “put your hand under my thigh?”

There are two rabbinic opinions on this subject. The word is actually “loins.” The first group assert that it is literally the thigh, and that by allowing his hand to be sat upon the servant taking the oath is coming under the authority of the one sitting on the hand. From a purely physical standpoint if the master is seated, which presumably he would be, the servant would then have to be on his knees. But there is another majority opinion, and we have to put our modesty aside for this one, because they certainly did. Did you know that the origin of the word testify is testicles? It seems that it is very possible that what was really happening was that the servant was being required to place his hand on or under the master’s reproductive organs—all of them. The rationale for this is that once Abraham was circumcised his male member was made holy, and therefore it was a holy object. But even the Romans did it. In very primitive times “testifying” involved a bit of self-exposure to prove one’s manhood. For the Jews of Abraham’s time, it was believed that to break an oath sworn in this way would result in “punishment from God (which) might include the death of one’s offspring or the fate of dying childless.” (Paul Achtemeier, a professor of biblical interpretation at Union Theological Seminary) Today we place our hands on other holy objects to take an oath—like the bible for example. I’ll take that!

All of this is to let you know that this was very serious business. This was not an ordinary oath or an ordinary promise. Abraham wanted a bride for his son from his own people. His servant committed himself to doing just that. Essentially, the servant became the matchmaker. Most Americans do not use matchmakers. Match.com maybe, but not matchmakers, unless we’re counting those friends who set us up on blind dates. But in this world, something as important as marriage could not be left up to the fickle heart of the individual, or the geographical regions in which a potential spouse could be found. We once had a couple from India as members whose matchmaker connected them from entirely different regions.

The servant left with ten camels loaded with fine things to give as gifts. We can be sure he was not alone. The trip was about 500 miles. It would have been an impressive caravan. The servant decided to set a test to determine which young woman to choose. The test had nothing to do with appearances, although Rebekah was beautiful. It was a given that she was a virgin. The test had to do with character. The servant prayed, "Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master."

Now drawing water for ten camels is no laughing matter. It's one thing to give a stranger something to drink. It is quite another to spend hours of back breaking labor watering ten camels. A camel can drink fifty gallons of water in three minutes. That's if they are not too thirsty. Camels drink an incredible amount because when full they won't need water again for about 10 days. It had been a long journey. These camels were running on empty. Rebekah may have carried as much as 500 gallons of water that day. She would have worked for HOURS. She exercised hospitality to a stranger far beyond the minimum expected of her. And much to the delight of Abraham's servant, he discovered that she was Isaac's cousin.

First cousin marriages are not particularly acceptable in America today, but my great great-grandparents were first cousins. Today whether or not you can marry your first cousin depends upon what state you live in. In Pennsylvania it was banned in 1902. But in some cultures, marriage between first cousins is desired because everyone already knows everyone else. There is no "your family-my family" dynamic to deal with. In Abraham's time the population of the earth was much lower and the connection was considered desirable.

The servant and the men traveling with him (who apparently did nothing while she watered all the camels) were welcomed home by Rebekah on behalf of her family. They went to the house, the camels were unloaded and fed, and everyone was given water to wash their feet. Food was set before Abraham's servant, but he said he could not eat until he had explained his mission. He laid out in detail the test he had set, and how Rebekah had completed it to the letter. When her father Bethuel and brother Laban heard everything, they agreed it was of God. It sounds like Rebekah had no choice in the matter at all. But later when the servant wanted to depart the next day she was asked if she would go, and she replied, "I will go."

Rebekah was not sent off on her own. She had the nursemaid who help raise her with her. Later we learn the woman's name was Deborah. She had other female attendants. She departed for an unknown future, but with hope. The description of the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah is bare to the point of nonexistent, because all of the legalities were taken care of ahead of time. Sarah had already passed away. Isaac simply set her up in his mother's tent

establishing her as the new matriarch. They had relations, and in that act, they were married. I always feel that couples who live together but are not married are married as far as God is concerned. We are so detached from our own bodies that we imagine that we can make partial commitments, but the physical act is also a spiritual act.

The story ends by saying that Isaac loved her. That is unusual in these accounts. This marriage became more than a business arrangement. There was love.

Abraham's servant was sent off to find a wife for Isaac. The criteria he chose had nothing to do with appearance. It was all about character. And the specific attribute he was looking for—that for which he tested—was how she would treat a stranger. We're not told if he approached others but he may well have done so. Most of these young women would probably not have minded offering a drink to the man. But watering ten camels?! That was beyond the pale. The ancient hospitality codes may have suggested such a thing was desirable, but most of the girls would have been more than capable of ignoring that.

The test was not how she treated her family. The test was not how well she prepared meals and acted as hostess. The test was not how smart she was. The test was not how well she cared for her skin or her hair or her nails. The test was how she treated strangers, people she had no connection with, people who she had nothing to gain by helping, people who were profoundly inconvenient.

Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit."

How well do we welcome the stranger? How hard do we work to put people at their ease when we have nothing to gain from the interaction? This is what God looks at. God wants to know how well we look out for one another, even and especially strangers.

The kingdom of God is about welcome and hospitality. Abraham and his whole extended family took hospitality very seriously. It was a matter of survival, and you never knew when you would be the one in need. I have been on both sides—the giver and the receiver, and I have to tell you, it's much harder to be the receiver. It is harder because when we are depending upon others for welcome and help, we are very, very vulnerable. Vulnerable people can be hurt, and many people have been hurt in the name of Christ. We have to be the divine antidote. Our mission from God is to exercise radical hospitality, to welcome all and to strive to make their journey easier, even when ten camels are involved. Amen

Genesis 24: 1-4; 10-25; 32-33; 42-45; 50-58; 61-67

24 Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. ² He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh. ³ I want you to swear by the Lord,

the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, ⁴ but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.”

¹⁰ Then the servant left, taking with him ten of his master’s camels loaded with all kinds of good things from his master. He set out for Aram Naharaim and made his way to the town of Nahor. ¹¹ He had the camels kneel down near the well outside the town; it was toward evening, the time the women go out to draw water.

¹² Then he prayed, “Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. ¹³ See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. ¹⁴ May it be that when I say to a young woman, ‘Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,’ and she says, ‘Drink, and I’ll water your camels too’—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.”

¹⁵ Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuelson of Milkah, who was the wife of Abraham’s brother Nahor. ¹⁶ The woman was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever slept with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again.

¹⁷ The servant hurried to meet her and said, “Please give me a little water from your jar.”

¹⁸ “Drink, my lord,” she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink.

¹⁹ After she had given him a drink, she said, “I’ll draw water for your camels too, until they have had enough to drink.”²⁰ So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels. ²¹ Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful.

²² When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose ring weighing a beka and two gold bracelets weighing ten shekels. ²³ Then he asked, “Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room in your father’s house for us to spend the night?”

²⁴ She answered him, “I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son that Milkah bore to Nahor.” ²⁵ And she added, “We have plenty of straw and fodder, as well as room for you to spend the night.”

³² So the man went to the house, and the camels were unloaded. Straw and fodder were brought for the camels, and water for him and his men to wash

their feet. ³³ Then food was set before him, but he said, “I will not eat until I “I will not eat until I have told you what I have to say.”

⁴² “When I came to the spring today, I said, ‘Lord, God of my master Abraham, if you will, please grant success to the journey on which I have come. ⁴³ See, I am standing beside this spring. If a young woman comes out to draw water and I say to her, “Please let me drink a little water from your jar,”⁴⁴ and if she says to me, “Drink, and I’ll draw water for your camels too,” let her be the one the Lord has chosen for my master’s son.’

⁴⁵ “Before I finished praying in my heart, Rebekah came out, with her jar on her shoulder. She went down to the spring and drew water, and I said to her, ‘Please give me a drink.’

⁵⁰ Laban and Bethuel answered, “This is from the Lord; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. ⁵¹ Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master’s son, as the Lord has directed.”

⁵² When Abraham’s servant heard what they said, he bowed down to the ground before the Lord. ⁵³ Then the servant brought out gold and silver jewelry and articles of clothing and gave them to Rebekah; he also gave costly gifts to her brother and to her mother. ⁵⁴ Then he and the men who were with him ate and drank and spent the night there.

When they got up the next morning, he said, “Send me on my way to my master.”

⁵⁵ But her brother and her mother replied, “Let the young woman remain with us ten days or so; then you may go.”

⁵⁶ But he said to them, “Do not detain me, now that the Lord has granted success to my journey. Send me on my way so I may go to my master.”

⁵⁷ Then they said, “Let’s call the young woman and ask her about it.” ⁵⁸ So they called Rebekah and asked her, “Will you go with this man?”

“I will go,” she said.

⁶¹ Then Rebekah and her attendants got ready and mounted the camels and went back with the man. So the servant took Rebekah and left.

⁶² Now Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi, for he was living in the Negev. ⁶³ He went out to the field one evening to meditate,^[1] and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching. ⁶⁴ Rebekah also looked up and saw Isaac. She got down from her camel ⁶⁵ and asked the servant, “Who is that man in the field coming to meet us?”

“He is my master,” the servant answered. So she took her veil and covered herself.

66 Then the servant told Isaac all he had done. **67** Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he married Rebekah. So she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

Matthew 7:15-20

15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. **16** By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? **17** Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. **18** A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.