

A Test of Kindness

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

July 9

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In classic theater, comedies almost always end with a wedding. Today's romantic comedies often end with a wedding. So it would be logical to think that today's Old Testament lesson is the wedding at the end of a comedy.

But the story of Isaac is no a comedy. Isaac had a hard life from the beginning. He was the child Abraham and Sarah almost didn't get to have. His older half-brother Ishmael was sent away, and he didn't understand why. His father terrified him by nearly offering him as a sacrifice to God. His early years were difficult.

Then the time came for him to marry. We read later in Genesis that he was 40 when he married. His mother had died. Sarah's dying wish was that he marry someone from her tribe. So the oldest of Abraham's servants was sent all the way back to Sarah's home to convince someone to come with him to marry Isaac.

The servant had a long journey during which to prepare. He took with him 10 camels. All the way he thought about the kind of woman to find as a wife for Isaac. Maybe he recognized how hard Isaac's life had been because as he walked he came up with a little test. It was not a test of beauty or strength or intelligence. It was a test of kindness. He would go to the spring with his camels and ask each woman who came to draw water to give him a drink. The first woman who offered to give water to him and also to his camels – she was the one. He was looking for someone who was kind and generous and helpful, someone who would go the extra mile for others.

When the servant got to the spring, Rebekah was the first woman to show up. He asked her for water and she gave it to them. Then she said, "I will draw for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." She was the one. Even better, she was also related to Abraham, which in those days meant she was a good match. The marriage was arranged. Rebekah returned with the servant and married Isaac and they lived happily ever after.

Well, not so much. For a long time, Rebekah struggled to have children. Finally, she became the mother of Jacob and Esau – twins who miraculously survived to adulthood. It should have been a

happy story. But the two brothers learned to hate each other. And Rebekah and Isaac made the worst of all parenting mistakes – they picked favorites. You may have heard the story of Jacob stealing his brother Esau’s inheritance and blessing. Esau got so mad he threatened to kill Jacob, and Jacob had to run away. By the time he returned, Rebekah had long since died.

So this kind woman who was willing to embrace an adventure and marry Isaac sight unseen ended up having a really hard life. And Isaac who suffered a great deal in childhood continued to suffer in his old age. Life can be very difficult.

I had a very sad experience this week. One of my former students from Indianapolis died. She developed an aggressive form of cancer in February. I had not heard much about her illness for a few months. Suddenly on Tuesday I saw a Facebook message saying her illness was untreatable. She died early Thursday morning. She was 17.

Few things are harder than the death of a child, so I’ve grieved a lot this week for her family and her friends and the many people who loved her. But I’m telling her story not just to confirm what we already know about the pain of life from scriptures and from experience. I’m telling her story because as she died some people came alongside her and, like Rebekah, offered extraordinary kindness.

This story has ended up in several news outlets, so you may have heard it. In the weeks before she died, one of her high school teachers met with her and helped her write out a bucket list – things she wanted to do in the time she had left. She wanted to graduate from high school and get accepted into college. She wanted to write a children’s book. She wanted to go back to Michigan, where she went every summer for camp. She wanted to finish reading the Harry Potter books. And she wanted to go strawberry picking with her friends and have a picnic at the art museum.

So her dad started reading Harry Potter to her aloud. She started working on a children’s book, about Stan the IV stand, a book to read to children who have to get IV’s. And when it became clear that she would not live much longer, her teachers and friends sprang into action. Her high school held a graduation ceremony for her at the hospital. Teachers presented her with foods from Michigan. She received acceptance letters from five colleges, acceptances she earned based on her own grades and SAT score. One of the letters was delivered by Blue, the Butler University bulldog. Everyone ate strawberries, and her friends promised to meet every July at the art museum for a picnic. These friends and teachers and the hospital staff were like Rebekah who offered the servant water and then offered water for his camels, too.

Life is so hard sometimes. Life was also hard for the unnamed servant in Abraham’s household. We read servant but we should really read slave. We should not pretend that this arrangement was acceptable because it is in the Bible or because that’s just how things were back then. Slavery and servitude were evil, even back then. This man was not free. He was the oldest of

Abraham's servants, so he had been without freedom the longest. His life was one long burden. And Abraham had given him another – go find a wife for Isaac.

Perhaps the burdens of his own life taught him to look for someone who would make the burdens of others lighter. Maybe his own hard life made him search for a woman who knew how to make things easier for others. Maybe that is why he looked for someone who would share water with him and have the compassion to offer water to his camels as well. The pain of our own lives helps us value compassion and offer it to others.

The friends of my student made her burden and that of her family a little lighter. Rebekah lifted the burden of this weary traveler.

Jesus knew we are all weary travelers. So he said, "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus rejected a religion that burdened people with ladders of respectability or categories of holiness. He rejected a yoke that kept the human spirit in bondage. Instead, he constantly set people free. To the man paralyzed on the mat lowered through the roof by his friends, he said, "Rise and walk." To the woman caught in adultery who everyone wanted to stone, he said, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more."

And to us he says, "Learn from me." Learn from me to lift one another's burdens. Learn from me to go the extra mile, to offer a cup of cold water to weary travelers and jugs of water for camels also. Learn from me to be gentle and humble of heart, and in that gentleness we find rest for our souls.

Henri-Frederic Amiel was a Swiss philosopher and writer. He also had a hard life. His parents died when he was twelve. He and his sisters were sent to live with different relatives. He was brilliant and excelled in school, but his academic career fell apart due to the politics of the time. He longed for a family but never found love. He wrote a number of books and essays that were not appreciated in his lifetime. He died feeling that he had not accomplished much.

But when he died, his journals were published and widely read. He had kept a journal faithfully for over thirty years. A friend edited the volumes. Amiel's writings astounded many with their insight and self-awareness.

And among the many things he wrote in his journals are these words:

Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind!

I hear many priests today using these words as a benediction. They add to Amiel's hope, "The blessing of God be with you always."

It is a fitting combination – a call to kindness from a man who knew how important it is, paired with the blessing of God.

The blessing of God is known in kindness, in following the example of Jesus who makes our yoke easy and our burden light. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind. Amen.