

“Strangers and Other Lovers”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 9, 2017
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 145:8-14 and Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

*The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The Lord is good to all,
and the Lord's compassion is over all that God has made.*

*All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power;
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.*

*The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.*

Psalm 145:8-14

This is the story of the transition between the leadership and the journeying of Abraham and Sarah to the movement to the next generation of Isaac and Rebekah.

So the man said, 'I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah, my master's wife, bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, "You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son."

I came today to the spring, and said, "O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make

successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also'—please let that one be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master's son."

'Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water-jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, "Please let me drink." She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, "Drink, and I will also water your camels." So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, "Whose daughter are you?" She said, "The daughter of Bethuel, Nabor's son, whom Milcah bore to him." So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshipped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master's kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.' So the family called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will.' So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham's servant and his men. And 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.'*

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

Now Isaac had come from Beer-labai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and 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. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then 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.

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

There is a story I've heard about a Rabbi of ancient times who was walking through his village early in the morning while it was still dark with some of his students. And he asked them, "How can you tell when the night is ended and the day has dawned?" The students pondered for a few moments and then one of them said, "Teacher, is it when you can see an animal and know whether it is a goat or a sheep?" His teacher said, "No, that is not it." Another student said, "Well, Rabbi, is it when you can look in the distance and see a tree and know whether it is a peach tree or an apple tree?" "No, that is not it either", said the teacher. The remaining students spoke with great deference, "Rabbi, is it when you can stretch out your hand and count all of your fingers?" The Rabbi said, "No." The students walked in silence for a while and finally gathered up their courage and said, "Well, Rabbi, then, when is it? How do you know when night is ended?" And the Rabbi answered them, "It is when you look into the face of a stranger and recognize them as a brother or a sister. If you cannot do this, then no matter what time it is, it is still night."

How do we look into the face of a stranger and see a brother or a sister? I think about this question all the time, now. Watching the news coverage of frightened Londoners running from yet another terror threat, and yet stopping beside a stranger to help one who had fallen or who had been hit by a car or shot. I think about it when the nice TSA man waves me through the pre-check line, but pulls aside my African-American colleague for more screening. I thought about it last month when in my work with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance I was in Juba, South Sudan, in a camp for internally displaced citizens of that country who are part of a minority ethnic tribe—330,000 of

them fled from the villages throughout the country living in close quarters in stick tents. I thought about it as overwhelmed by the numbers of people, the women in a group that I was speaking with surrounded me and grabbed my arm and said, "Sister, sister, listen to us. You need to hear our story." We live, it seems these days, in a world filled with threatening strangers. So how is it that we can look into their faces and see the face of a brother or a sister, so that night can end and the day dawn for all of us?

It is comforting for me to know that our ancestors in faith also struggled with these questions as they followed the promise of a God invisible, whose face they could not see nor recognize. As they prayed and wandered as Abraham did, following a promise that seemed so preposterous and so far off that it could not ever come true. It's clear to me from this story that ends Abraham's part of the story and shifts to the son, Isaac, that Abraham also shares with us those feelings of weariness and wariness, those feelings of resistance and longing that we would somehow be able to find a place and a time where we have to stop working so hard to be among people we do not know and to try to be faithful and can instead just go back to the way it used to be, among people who are our family, the people we have always known.

Here in this morning's text, you hear Abraham's servant, really his slave, repeating the story of how his master, Abraham, told him *I don't want anything more to do with these Canaanites among whom I have to live. Go back home. Find for my son a woman of my own kin.* You can hear reflected in the servant's voice the weariness of Abraham, the fear of all the difference that he is forced to live in the midst of and you can also hear with a broken heart how the promise God once gave Abraham, *you will be blessed to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth*, has been reduced to *I will bless you and your own people.*

As sometimes happens to us when we look back, when Abraham looks back at his long life, it seems that the mistakes he made loom larger than the good that he did, and he did make a lot of mistakes—another wonderful thing about the Bible—the heroes are so flawed. Abraham tried to sacrifice one of his children and the other one he sent away into exile. One wife, Sarah, left him. The other, Hagar, he sent into exile with Ishmael. Isaac, the hope of his future, the culmination of the promise of God. The stories before this one show us that Isaac no longer trusted his father nor wanted to live him. Rather he lived with Sarah, in his mother's tent. Abraham is now alone, living among strangers, the heir of a promise that seems as empty as his own tent, and he desperately wants to restore the fragments of the dream and the unity of his family and the hope of that family's future for which he worked. But how? What Abraham has left is a longing for family ties which is a mere fragment of the hope and the promise that God showed him when he was young.

In Abraham's words as he charges his servant, you hear that weariness, you hear the fear of the people among whom he lives and deep within his voice we hear the longing that the hope and the promise can be restored. But how? And, wait a minute, who is it who is telling this story to us, this person without a name, this servant or slave of Abraham's, this man who actually has no part in the promise, who is, as a slave probably himself a Canaanite? Who is this man who has caught from Abraham a fragment of the dream of being a blessing to all of the nations on earth and who goes, not just because he is ordered to go, but because he, himself, has captured a bit of the dream for which Abraham has lived his whole life?

Sometimes these days, in the midst of hard political challenges and so much divisiveness, I find myself, and in talking to other friends, I know they also find themselves, sad. The America of my childhood felt unified even across political divides. The America of my childhood felt safe and

loving and full of promise for a future and welcome for all. And sometimes in these hard days, I find myself pushing back cynicism and sorrow and even anger. And then I talk to a new immigrant who doesn't see what I see in America in this moment. What she sees in America is the depth of the promise and listening to her, I find hope again, and joy.

So, too, when this slave of Abraham's talks about the promise of Abraham's family, a promise that he believes in, the family of Rebekah finds joy. Isn't this like the stories of so many Japanese-Americans who even while their families were interned by the fears of government in that moment in World War II, fought and died for the American dream? Isn't this like African-American slaves who fought for the Union during the Civil War and lived and died and fought for civil rights, and dreamed and believed that we would find unity and equality for all, even though some days, these days, that dream seems very far off? Isn't it like non-citizens who fought for us in Afghanistan and Iraq and have come to process their citizenship requests only to be told *no, we're deporting you?*

Even though Abraham no longer believes the dream that God gave him, the servant believes the dream and he is willing to fight for it. So when our vision fades or our hope flags, time and time again scripture shows us that it is the stranger, the outsider, the foreigner, the newcomer who comes to take our hand and tell us, as if we are hearing it for the first time, the story of our own people, the story of our life and our hope. All through scripture, both testaments, the foreigner, the Gentile, the Samaritan—all of these outsiders believed in a dream, came to us and participated, making the tent larger than it was before and reinvigorating the dream that had, for some, gone stale.

In Chevy Chase, Maryland, there is a congregation about the size of this one, just north of downtown Washington, D.C., and they have a mission committee. That mission committee has, as part of their work a subcommittee, and that subcommittee's work is participating in refugee resettlement. A year ago they were invited to be the accompanying congregation for a Syrian family who had fled war in their home city and were coming to emigrate to the United States. They spent two years in a refugee camp in Jordan after fleeing the bombed out wreckage of their home. They were coming on a plane one night when the co-chair of that committee picked up the phone and called an older lady named Lucy. She said to her, "Lucy, do you know where I am?" And Lucy said, "No." And the woman said, "I am sitting outside the International Terminal at Ronald Reagan International Airport. I am sitting in exactly the same place where you stood 37 years ago holding up a sign to welcome my family when we came from Vietnam. Now I am here, the co-chair of that committee, and I am standing with other church members and we are holding up signs in Arabic and in English to welcome our family home, and to help them and walk with them as once you walked with me. The woman co-chair was interviewed by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance for a short film about the resettlement of that family who have now been with the Chevy Chase congregation for a year. She was asked, "Why do you do this work?" And she said, "I need to do this because I was a refugee. I need to do this to honor my father's memory, to make sure we keep opening our doors to people who want to be here. My dad, more than anyone, was so grateful for this community. And even though we were not of your religion and even though none of us spoke any English, you made us at home and you made us part of your family." So Abraham once was told, *you will be blessed to be a blessing and in you all the families of earth will be blessed.*

When I travel around the church sometimes, I hear a lot of lament. I hear lament that the church is smaller, it's not like it used to be. And I watch the news and I hear how endlessly fearful we have become, and how dangerous the world is, and make no mistake the world is a dangerous place. I think most of us agree that it would be good if things would change in the church, in our country, in our communities and in the world. I wonder as we face those changes what it would be

like if we were less like Abraham, wishing for what was and trying to avoid newness, and we would be more like Abraham's servant, open to possibilities, eager to look into the faces of strangers and see the possibility of love and connection, of new families being born where once before they were only strangers—I wonder if then the night would end and the day would dawn.

As I try to listen to the church when I travel and listen to the global partners that we have, I find myself thinking about a young woman whom I met when we were making a documentary about detention visitation a couple of years ago. She was an African-American college student from Georgia and she was fulfilling her community service obligation by getting on a bus and riding down to Stewart, Georgia, where there is a detention center that holds families and children who have been detained as they seek asylum and work to avoid deportation. She said when she first started doing this volunteer gig, she was doing it to mark her hours as fulfillment of her degree. She said she was just trying to show up and be a visitor because she knew it was the right thing to do. She talked about the first person she ever met there. “I was the first person to see this individual,” she said, “in more than six months. The first person from outside to visit this person in six months. And I felt compelled to continue to visit. It broke my heart. I guess what surprised me was, I was coming as a volunteer, but I left realizing, no—this is a friend. We very quickly connected” she described, “on a human basis—friend to friend. He lost his case eventually,” she concluded, “and I just want to see him one more time. I don't know what's happening next.” She came as a volunteer out of obligation. She left as a friend.

When is the night over and the day begun? I think it's when we see beyond the failures of our national boundaries and our church doctrines to the heart of the promise beneath. I think it's when we put aside our comfort in order to enter the world of another person, the experience of another community, especially when that world is just across the city or right around the corner from us. I believe it's when we make space in our ways and in our world for others whose tradition, whose experience, whose language and whose worship does not feel like ours. Because we know this world should be and can be bigger than only what makes us comfortable. When we, along with thousands of other Presbyterian congregations, choose welcome and when we try to learn to live it out here in St. Louis, home for me in Louisville or Miami where I came from, or in Chevy Chase, Maryland. When we choose welcome because we know it's the right thing to do and because we know that those we welcome will see a dream as deeply and hold it as tightly as we do.

God is weaving through the tangles and the knots of our dreams and the ways we have broken them. God is weaving a tapestry, a kingdom, a place where we will be blessed to be a blessing, and where in us, all of the nations of the earth will be blessed. And in that world there will be promise for all of us, not just for some of us. And I believe that when we share gladly in the responsibility and the privilege to make that tapestry whole, that's when the night is over and the day has begun. Amen.