



Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride* (Isaac and Rebecca)

There was a wistful sense of loss that overwhelmed me as I was preparing for the sermon today. In my ESV Study Bible, there is a map which marks out the journey Abraham's servant made when he was seeking a wife for Isaac among his kindred. And that journey lead straight through the city of Aleppo. Aleppo was supposed to have been architecturally beautiful, and a place of culture and wonderfully advanced Arab cuisine. But I will never get the chance to view the ancient buildings of Aleppo or taste its food. It's all gone now, destroyed by man's violence and the hatred of war. And God finds it so hard to work his miracles and blessings in the face of that kind of rebellious wickedness to which man is so accustomed.

The betrothal of Isaac and Rebekah is surely one of the most beautiful in Scripture. And in this account, it is the faithfulness and loving kindness of the people involve who make it possible for God to work the full abundance of his blessing. If you read the verses leading up to today's passage, you find that Abraham's servant is completely faithful in fulfilling his master's instructions (See Gen.24:2-9); Then there is the earnest prayer of the servant at the well when he finally arrives at his destination to humbly thank God (vv.11-14); There is the servant's immediate response of worshiping the Lord for the successful outcome of his mission to find Rebekah (v. 26), and then his worship of God at the release of Rebekah by her family to become Isaac's wife as being God's doing. (v.52); And we can note Rebekah's loving response to give well water not only to the servant but to the livestock as well (vv.18-20); Laban and his family are studiously generous in there hospitality (vv.31-33); and finally the actions of all these people demonstrate an assurance that it is God who is working out this love story in the midst of their busy lives, and they in their faithfulness do everything they can to respond immediately to God's call on them, even if they cannot clearly see the eventual outcome. So much loving of each other is apparent in this Gospel passage.

In Rom. 7:21-25a We find that we are not actually capable of loving our neighbors as ourselves on our own. (This is on p. 1756 of your pew Bible)

"So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

The passage from Romans also points to the futility of our dependence on earthly law alone. Surely, if nothing else, the kerfuffle over J-walking in Jacksonville this past week should prove to us that the law, which is designed to safe-guard our society is powerless to protect us if we are hard-wired to be faithless, either in obeying these laws or in justly and impartially enforcing them.

The passage from Matthew this morning demonstrates how rebellious we all are. We are, in some respects part of "the generation of those children sitting in the market place." It is the nature of our willfull, self-focus that wants God to conform to our expectations of him, rather than allowing ourselves to be transformed into the shining beings he wants all of us to become. And so, we judge and condemn each other, or as the younger brother of Jesus says, "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You desire and do not have, so you murder. What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? (Jas.4:3,2, 1)..We are woefully inept either in obeying or enforcing even those laws which are supposed to be enacted for our own good."

The Collect for this Sunday in the church year is prayer that we all love God and our neighbor, and be devoted to God with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection. But the collect also accurately recognizes that this is possible only by the grace of God's Holy Spirit, not our own.

Matthew 11:27 reads, "All things have been committed to my (handed over to me) by my father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." This is perhaps the verse that more than any other reveals the divine self-consciousness of Jesus as having been granted the full authority of The Creator God, the first person of the Trinity. The Pharisees, and all those who rejected Jesus were powerless to seek God and righteousness because they refused to recognize God's authority. That's true of all of us, you know. And that's what the Collect for today says too. We are powerless to truly love God and love our neighbor until we are able to recognize his authority in our lives.

Buzz Light Year in Toy Story famously said, "To infinity and beyond!" That seems to be in keeping with the last verse of the Psalter for today, which reads, "I will perpetuate your memory through all generations; therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever." Reading this Psalm from a perspective of Christian theology, the bride of the King here is often understood to be the Body of Christ, the church. And those who are promised a memory that will be perpetuated down through the generations are the faithful of Our Lord. Because, one of the beautiful things recognizing God's authority in our lives grants is not only our eternal citizenry in his Kingdom, but the impact our lives can have in this world way beyond that day when we leave it.

If you take the subway to the Ostia train station in Rome, as you walk through the main exit, you will be looking at an **Egyptian Pyramid**. It's bizarre in the middle of the rest of the Roman architecture along the Aurelian Wall. This strange pyramid was commissioned as a private mausoleum by a mid-level Roman official in the first century, named Caius Cestinus. You see, Cestinus thought a great deal of himself and wanted people to remember and revere him. So he had a fake Egyptian pyramid built in around 15 BC to his own honor. Well, if you walk around the pyramid to the other side you will come to a sweet green hill surrounded by an old iron fence. If you walk through the gate in this fence, you will be standing in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome. And if you walk up the hill to the far corner you come to the grave of John Keats, perhaps the greatest of the English Romantic poets. And on Keats's tomb stone, are these words: "Here lies one whose name was written in water." You see at his death, in his great humility, this son of an English stable-master, John Keats was sure that no one would ever be interested in his scribbles. He thought that it was as though his life had been spent writing on moving streams of water, and his words were destined to be dissolved away by the swift current of time.

Well, I don't know anyone who remembers much about Caius Cestinus, despite his pyramid. But there's not a day goes by that the words of John Keats in dozens of languages, in hundreds of countries around the world inspire lovers to love, and poets to dream, and scholars to write, and yes...even pastors to preach.

Justice and righteousness belong to God. These are traits perfected in his authority. And a part of God's justice and righteousness is this: Those who proudly live their lives to serve themselves are destined to be forgotten. Those who humbly live their lives in selfless love to others are destined to be cherished in memory. And those who live their lives in humble service to Our Lord are destined to live forever in His glory. Please, Lord Jesus, make it so for all of us.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 7-07-17