

## **“Matchmaker”**

When I attended Oral Roberts University, the dorms were not co-ed. A dormitory had either all men or all women. The chaplains, though, matched a wing (floor) of men (32) with a wing of women (32) to do social activities for the year. We often sat at meals together, went to basketball games together, and went on retreats. It was a good way to get to know people.

Towards the end of my junior year, one of the young women on my sister-wing said she needed to talk with me. We met in the cafeteria after lunch. She said she needed my advice. I was flattered but wasn't sure why she needed advice from me, a young 20 year old. She was a senior, getting ready to graduate, and I figured she already knew more than I did.

As we started talking, I realized why she needed to talk to me. We had become friends over the last year but there wasn't any romantic interest between us. She needed someone she could trust but also be objective. She told me that over the last two months two different male students, both also getting ready to graduate, had told her that God has chosen her for them. Obviously, she was confused. I asked her if she felt strong about marrying either one of them. She said she did not want to get married to either one.

I told her she was being taken advantage of by both men. Because she was a Christian, they each wanted her to believe that God was playing a matchmaker in her life. There was a belief by some at the school that God had our mate chosen for us at the school and if we didn't match up while there we would lose out on our God chosen mate. I didn't believe in this and I told her so. I told her that God always lets us make our own choices. I encouraged her to pray about it but if I were her, I would end her relationships with both men. If they didn't have her best interest in mind at this point, they wouldn't down the road. She followed my advice.

Today we have the story of Abraham finding a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24. Abraham has reached the age of 140 years old. It is not long before he will die. It is time for Isaac, his son, to marry. Isaac himself is 40 years old. Abraham's good and faithful servant (probably Eliezer) serves as the mediator of the transition.

To put this story into context, it is a love story but it does not include the romance we are used to today when people get married. The concept of romantic marriage has really only been around for about 200 years, if that long. Today we think of people meeting and then having a period of time when they date, go to events, go out to eat, exchange gifts and spend time getting to know each other. They meet through various social contacts. Church used to be a major way couples

meet and it still is, though not to the same degree. People often find a spouse where they attend college or school. This is how Ellisa and I met. Some go to bars or eating establishments to meet. Friends can introduce friends to each other on blind dates. In the last twenty years, society has been introduced to internet dating, where potential couples are introduced through companies such as E-harmony which uses computer information to match potential marriage possibilities.

Our story today reflects how most marriages occurred up until about two hundred years ago. They were either arranged or were unions of practicality. There was not this romantic wooing of someone else. Abraham does not send out Isaac to find his wife. He sends out his faithful servant. One could refer to the servant as a matchmaker, although as discussed later he was more like a salesman. God was really the matchmaker and Eliezer his agent. There are still matchmakers today in some cultures. When I took a course on Islam in seminary, my Islamic professor described how she also worked as a matchmaker. She would be hired by a family to find a suitable spouse for their child. She had access to a database of potential matches and would investigate the potential spouse and his/her family. This investigation involved interviews with the potential match and match's family. Financial records were researched as well as criminal records. Depending upon what the matchmaker concluded, the couple might be introduced.

Abraham sets forth certain criteria for Isaac's wife. First, Abraham was sending Eliezer back into the land from which he came to find a woman among his family members. He specifically says she is not to come from the Canaanites among which he lives. At first glance this appears racist on the part of Abraham. But upon further examination, it related more to keeping his faith pure and not letting financial considerations tarnish his family. Abraham had been blessed and had prospered. He now lived among the Canaanites. He could have entered into an alliance with a local chieftan to marry his son off to one's daughter and gain more of a footing in the land where he lived. But Abraham relied on promises from God, not political or economic alliances.

Second, the area where he sends Eliezer contains his family members who share the same worship of Yahweh as does Abraham. By seeking a wife in that area, one would more likely find a person with similar religious views.

Abraham also makes clear that whatever woman Eliezer chooses for Isaac, she must consent to the marriage. Once again we see the presence of human choice within God's divine plan. Although success may well depend on God, the activity of human beings may occasion failure even though God intends success. Without God's steadfast love, there will be no success. Lack of success is not due to lack of God's love; it is the result of human decision making. As one interpreter writes,

“Divine providence does not mean that the future is somehow predetermined or that human decision making can never frustrate the divine designs.”

As with Abraham’s decision of whether or not to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, we see once again that we have choices as to whether we will take action to do God’s will. God provides us guidance through his Holy Spirit, the scriptures, church tradition and through others, but we ultimately make the decisions on what to do. In this story Rebekah ultimately agrees to be Isaac’s wife. Rebekah is like Abraham in that she follows the faithful response of leaving home and family to further God’s purposes.

We then have the example of the faithfulness of Abraham’s servant. The narrator’s description of Rebekah in vv.15-16 enables the reader to know she will be Isaac’s wife before the servant does. The focus then falls on the servant’s faithful handling of the situation. When the conversation first occurs, the servant does not immediately understand if this is the woman. A time of reflection is needed. We see the importance of prayer in the life of the servant. He was aware of his great spiritual responsibility. He seems to have felt the choice was to be God’s, so he proposed a sign to God. The young woman who came to the well would be the choice. Eliezer relied on God’s guidance.

Eliezer is an example to us to continue to rely on God's guidance as we do our work. And always be faithful and thankful to God. When it becomes clear that Rebekah will be the choice for Isaac's wife, Eliezer gives public thanks to God.

But the servant still has work to do. He has to meet with Rebekah's family and convince them that they should approve the marriage. He tells them the story and how Abraham has been blessed by God. Once again we see how we do God's work on earth. God may have intended for this marriage to occur but he still uses us as his agents on earth to do the work.

And this is a very important marriage. It is not just about Isaac and Rebekah. It is about all of Israel and the salvation of the whole human race.

The servant's job is probably made easier by the fact that Rebekah is related to Isaac. Rebekah is the grand-daughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother. Her father, Bethuel, and Isaac are first cousins. At first thought, this might come as odd to you, but it was not that uncommon for closely related family members to get married. At that time people did not know of the danger of marrying close kin. There were no scientific heredity laws. Even today first cousins can safely marry. Also, there were a limited number of people in the tribes or the areas where people lived. It was not that unusual even in recent times for cousins to marry. My maternal grandmother's parents were cousins. They both had the same great-grandparents.

Living in Yemasee in Colleton County, there were only so many people in 19<sup>th</sup> century wilderness South Carolina. English Kirkland Jones married Mary Emma Jones.

Once Rebekah's family agreed to the marriage, they wanted to delay her departure for a few days as was the custom. However, the servant insists on leaving at once so the good news can be brought to Abraham. They call on Rebekah to make her own decision. She agrees to go ahead and go. Once again, we see free will. When she arrives and sees Isaac for the first time, she covers herself with a veil. According to eastern custom, a bride could not be seen until the marriage rites are completed. Thus our custom today that the bride and groom are not to see each other the day of the wedding until the ceremony and the bride wears a veil during the service.

Rebekah goes into Sarah's tent when she arrives. This signals her new role as the matriarch of the family.

With this long story of 67 verses, at the end in one verse we read that Isaac took Rebekah and married her and loved her. We do not get some long romantic story of how he wooed her with romantic flowers and chocolates and jewels. Their love grew after their marriage. As I have learned in my own marriage, and I am

sure many of you realize, the love in a marriage always grows in the marriage as we rejoice in good things and deal with trials we face.

Once again, the lesson we learn from this story is that we have free agency to do God's will within God's overall plan. We look to God's guidance but we must take action to do his work. We must constantly be in prayer and thank God for how he will use in his kingdom work. We can be matchmakers as well as it is our job to bring people together. Our main way of changing the world is through the relationships we create and nurture. We are at a time when people need to be brought together to talk and have relationship in order to bring justice. The work of bringing people together is holy. First in families and then in churches we learn that we live not for ourselves but for one another. Like Rebekah, we end up traveling to places we never thought we would go for the sake of the love of God.