

The 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 24:1-67; Psalm 45:10-17 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Matthew 11:16-30; Romans 7:15-25a

Genesis 24:1-67 is the story of Isaac's marriage to Rebekah. In order to effectively exegete it, one needs to study the entire story, but that story is obviously too lengthy for reading at worship. It can be publicly read by selecting key segments of the story that would include vss. 1-4, 34-38, 42-49 and 58-67.

Sarah, the founding matriarch of Israel, has just died (23:1-20). This story, therefore, presents the new matriarch, the one who is to take Sarah's place – Rebekah. She will become the matriarch of the next generation, as the focus moves from Abraham (who is still alive) to Isaac. The story of Isaac and Rebekah's engagement and eventual marriage is an intriguing story because it preserves within it many of the customs governing marriage in the ancient Near East, and thus provides us with knowledge about the functioning of that society that we would otherwise never know.

It begins with Abraham's decision to find a bride for Isaac (24:1-9). Abraham instructs his most trusted and faithful servant (perhaps Eliezer of Damascus [15:2-3]), "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but you will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac" (vss. 2b-4).

There are three essential observations to be made regarding this beginning of the story. The first is that the bride for Isaac will not be found among "the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live" but back with Abraham's ancestral family in Haran, whom he had left in order to follow God's call to Canaan. This follows the traditional Near Eastern structures of kinship, in which marriage is only appropriate within one's larger kinship group rather than outside it. Abraham and Nahor were brothers, their common father being Terah (Genesis 11:27-32; 22:20-24). Whereas Nahor's son, Bethuel was born to Nahor early in life, Isaac was born late in life to Abraham so that there was a generation between the two cousins. Bethuel, in turn, had married and fathered both Rebekah and Laban who, though the second cousin of Isaac was virtually Isaac's age. Thus, even though they were closely related, these two families were strangers to one another because they had lived hundreds of miles apart and their respective children had never met one another.

What is important in this scenario, however, is that the story is built around two promises of God, one of which is about to be fulfilled. The first promise is the promise of land. The second is the promise of descendants. The reason for Abraham's journey to Canaan was to become the occupant of the land. If Abraham were ever to truly meet Yahweh, he would have to journey to Canaan, because that was the land that Yahweh occupied (the ancients believed that all gods occupied specific land and only had power within that land; Yahweh occupied Canaan and therefore Abraham had to journey there if he were to embrace Yahweh). Thus, if Yahweh was to have salvation history begin through the Semites and the descendants of Abraham, Abraham had to become an occupant (in fact, *the* occupant) of the land of Canaan!

But Abraham's descendants could not be the other occupants of the land, the Canaanites. God's call and covenant was with the Semites, and particularly the family of Terah. That being true, it was required that the continued generation of that family compelled Abraham to return to Haran to find a kinswoman to be Isaac's bride. But Isaac would not go to Haran to find her; rather she would come to him. And this was so, because there were two promises of God: a promise of descendants and a promise of the land. So the one in whom the descendants would reside would have to come to the Promised Land!

That God blesses the world through one particular family is, at one and the same time, the engagement and the offense of the Hebrew Bible. "How odd of God to choose the Jews", wrote Ogden Nash. But that is exactly what God did, demonstrating that both the redemption and liberation of humanity does not come by giant undertakings but by the faithfulness of just one frail and limited human being.

The second observation about this story was the nature of the commitment made by the servant to Abraham in seeking a bride for Isaac. "Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth" (vs. 2b). What is this strange ritual about?

The servant who was to carry out this oath was to place his hand under the bottom of Abraham's robe and touch his genitals while making the agreement. This was the means of the most binding of agreements. The genitals were seen by ancient Near Eastern people as the source of procreative and vital power (Deut. 33:11; Job 40:16; Heb. 7:10). By placing one's hands upon the other person's genitals, the one touching the genitals was making a binding commitment that would result in a curse or a ban in case of non-compliance. It is variously called in the text an "oath" (vs. 8) or a "ban" (vs. 41), meaning that there was no release from this oath except for its completion. Only if the woman refused to return with the servant to Canaan to marry Isaac, would the servant be freed from his obligation (vs. 8). But the servant would not be freed because of circumstances or his inability to perform this assignment. In fact, the oath implied that if the servant did not comply with Abraham's wish, he would become sterile himself and his family line would be extinguished. That is how great a commitment the servant was making to Abraham.

Finally, it is worth noting that this was a death-bed wish. The only other instance in which "placing the hand under the thigh" is used as a pledge is at the time of the approaching death of Jacob (Gen. 47:29) when his son, Joseph (and vizier of Egypt) made an unbreakable promise to that patriarch. As we will demonstrate below, that is also the case here. So this is a death-bed promise!

The third crucial observation of this story is that the oath which Abraham had his most trusted servant swear was, in essence, Abraham's last will and testament. He was clearly trying to wrap up "loose ends" by making sure that his son got married, and got married to the woman that would continue the covenant made between God and Abraham. It was that reality that added such an imperative to the task Abraham assigned to the servant. And that urgency was not unwisely placed. Although the text doesn't directly state Abraham's death, it implies that Abraham had died by the time the servant returned to Canaan with Rebekah. The text tells us,

“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” (vss. 66-67a).

That text is full of what could only be construed as a spectrum of highly inappropriate actions unless Abraham was dead. First, it had been Abraham who had sent the servant forth under oath and obligation; consequently, the servant would have returned to Abraham, not Isaac. The servant would have presented Rebekah to Abraham for the patriarch’s blessing and then Abraham would have formally presented her to Isaac. Isaac wouldn’t have taken her “into his mother Sarah’s tent” if Abraham were still the patriarch, because it would be Abraham’s tent, not Isaac’s. And Rebekah wouldn’t have succeeded Sarah as matriarch (the meaning of being brought into the matriarch’s tent). All this together suggests that Abraham was dead, and indeed had died while the servant was making his nearly one-year trip to and from Haran. If that had been so, it would have been appropriate for the servant to return to Isaac and state that he had fulfilled the oath. It would have been appropriate for the servant to present Rebekah to the new patriarch, Isaac. Because both Sarah and Abraham were dead (Sarah died in chapter 23), it would be appropriate for Isaac to be occupying the patriarch’s tent and to bring Rebekah into that tent, not only as his bride, but as the new matriarch. Thus it is reasonable to assume that Abraham had died during the servant’s trip to Haran and that Abraham’s oath had been his last legal act, guaranteeing a posterity after him.

But if this is so, how does one explain the continuance of the story of Abraham in Genesis 25:1-11? That is an easy explanation. The stories of the Bible – and especially in Genesis – are not necessarily linear. Rather, each story is its own complete story, reaching its denouement in that story. The story of the calling of Rebekah to continue the lineage of Abraham is its own complete story, so it begins with a death-request of Abraham and ends with his death. But the larger story of Abraham still has some uncompleted details. Thus, those details are wrapped up in the 25th chapter.

So Abraham gives his assignment to his servant. “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac” (vss. 2b-4). The servant accepts the assignment and sets out with a retinue of staff, animals and treasures in order to pay the bride-price for the woman.

Upon arriving in Haran, the servant decides to seek a potential wife for Isaac through an omen. This omen would reveal to the servant God’s choice of the woman. The servant makes “the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water; it was toward evening, the time when women go out to draw water” (vs. 11). The servant prays, “O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I am standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say, ‘Please offer your jar that I may drink’, and who shall say, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’ – let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master” (vss. 12-14).

What the author is eager to communicate through this prayer and the action that follows upon it is that the choice of Rebekah to be both the wife of Isaac and the new matriarch of the Abrahamic line was not a matter of whim, of simply choosing the prettiest or most receptive girl for marriage. The author wants the reader to clearly understand that this woman is God's choice! The selection of Rebekah is not mere chance or the wise judgment of the servant, but is an integral part of God's plan for all human society (vv. 21, 27, 50-51).

It is intriguing that the servant selects a specific word to describe God's motivation for selecting Rebekah for Isaac. In verse 12, he prays, 'Please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham'. Again, in verse 14, he concludes, "By this (fulfillment of the omen) I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master". The Hebrew word used here that is translated "steadfast love" is the word *chesedh*. It is a unique Hebrew word, untranslatable into English because there is no English equivalent to it. Consequently, it is translated by stringing several English words together to render an approximate translation. "Steadfast love" is one of those "strung" approximations; another is "loving kindness" (e.g., Micah 6:8); still another is "mercy" (e.g. Psalm 117:2). What the word is seeking to communicate is God's utter commitment to one or more of his chosen people that is manifested in the utter binding of the covenant that God has made with them or promised to them as a manifestation of his undying and uncompromising love for them. In other words, no matter what they do or how they act, God will not let go of them because he has *chesedh* toward them (the New Testament concept of "grace" comes closest to the Hebrew idea of *chesedh*). Therefore, by using the word twice in this statement of the omen, the servant is actually putting God on trial. He is, in essence, saying, "Let's see how deeply God's loving commitment to Abraham really lies. If God's love is truly *chesedh* love, God will use this situation to bring exactly God's choice to me so that I can offer her the hand of Isaac in marriage". Let's see what God does!

Rebekah, "born to Bethuel son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother" (vs. 15) comes to the well. But the servant does not yet know that she is Abraham and Isaac's kins-woman. She is just another face in the crowd. But the servant is immediately drawn to her, because "the girl was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known" (vs. 16) (how would the servant know she was a virgin? It was because her virginity was proclaimed by the way she was dressed). The servant goes to her and makes a request for a drink of water. Rebekah not only gives him a drink but (following the omen) in all innocence, offers to refresh his camels, as well. He agrees, and she does so. Rebekah has, unknowingly, passed all the tests.

Then comes the greatest conformation. The servant asks her name, and she replies, "I am the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor" (vs. 24)! She is a kinswoman, exactly the particular kinswoman who Isaac should marry. This is obviously God's will!

The servant reveals who he is and asks if he and his entourage could "room in your father's house this night" (vs. 23). She agrees, and he brings out the bride price, "a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels" (vs. 22). She accepts it, and then "the girl ran and told her mother's household about these things" (vs. 28). The servant meanwhile gives thanks. The text tells us, "The man bowed his head and worshiped the Lord and said 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken

his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the Lord has led me on the way to the house of my master's kin'" (vs. 27).

It is at this juncture in the story that a peculiar thing happens. "Rebekah had a brother whose name was Laban and Laban ran out to the man, to the spring. As soon as he had seen the nose-ring, and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah, "Thus the man spoke to me," he went to the man; and there the servant was, standing by the camels at the spring. Laban said, "Come in, O blessed of the Lord. Why do you stand outside when I have prepared the house and a place for the camels?"" (vss. 29-31).

Laban is Rebekah's brother. But according to Near Eastern custom, it was the right and responsibility of the patriarch of the family, who was Bethuel, to issue such an invitation, not the brother! Further, Laban had said "I have prepared the house and a place for the camels". But it was not Laban's right to do so; only the father could order that done. As well, Bethuel appears nowhere in this event; it is as if he did not exist except in vs. 50 where it states that "Laban and Bethuel answered", in what is an ambiguous translation of the Hebrew. No gifts are given to Bethuel when gifts are lavished upon Laban, Rebekah and Rebekah's mother. Even if Bethuel was infirm or seriously ill, this would be a thoroughly-unbelievable infraction of desert etiquette. Finally, it is Laban that conducts all the negotiations for the bride-price for Rebekah; Bethuel is not even mentioned in this context. All of this draws biblical scholars to the conclusion that Bethuel was dead, and that Laban had now rightly assumed the position of patriarch of the family.

There is something else that is intriguing about this passage in regards to Laban. Rebekah comes across as warm, friendly, helpful, generous, and eager to share her excitement with members of her household. But Laban comes across quite differently. He doesn't show much interest in the visit of the servant until "he had seen the nose-ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms"; at this display of significant wealth from the servant, Laban suddenly becomes very engaged. Further, he provides appropriate Near Eastern hospitality, but the focus of his attention was on the negotiations with the servant for the bride-price of Rebekah, ready to accept "jewelry of silver and of gold, and garments" for Rebekah's "brother (i.e., Laban) and mother" (vs. 53). Finally, Laban seeks to delay the departure of Rebekah "at least ten days" (vs. 55), apparently to increase even more payment to the family for Rebekah. But the servant will not hear of it, and the negotiations end. Thus, Laban is described as greedy and concerned with his own welfare as opposed to his sister's welfare, traits that are confirmed in a later story in Genesis (29:15—30:43).

It is important to recognize that this story is not just a romance but an economic encounter, as well. Any intended groom's family was expected to pay a "bride-price" for the intended bride. In reality, this was a significant financial transaction because a carefully-negotiated bride-price could build the fortunes of the woman's family (much as marrying a millionaire today can change the economic future of the intended's family). The negotiations of the bride-price presented in this story were that of the Hurrian marriage practice – a practice that would be the norm in the region of Haran. The written contract issuing from this negotiation would have the following elements about it: 1) naming of the principals; 2) nature of the transaction; 3) the specifics regarding payment made for the bride; 4) the girl's declaration of concurrence, and 5)

any penalties ensuing if the contract were breached.¹ It is intriguing that all of the above is included in this story of Rebekah's agreement to marry Isaac except for a listing of penalties; and that was unnecessary because it was perceived as a marriage ordained by God!

Before Rebekah leaves with Abraham's servant to return to Canaan, Rebekah's family gives her a blessing. That blessing is intriguing in the light of the earlier blessing (22:17) given to Abraham, and therefore transferable to Isaac. They said to her, "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes" (vs. 60). The earlier blessing given to Abraham has God say, "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies" (22:17). There are amazing parallels between the two blessings, and it is intentionally so – because this second blessing is to reinforce the theme that God's choice of Rebekah to continue the lineage of Abraham was a very intentional choice by God, the acting out of God's will upon Abraham's family, so that "by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (22:18).

"Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus, the servant took Rebekah, and went his way" (24:61).

The story ends with Rebekah and Isaac finally meeting in the distant "promised land" of Canaan. "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 (Isaac)". 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" (vss. 64-67).

The marriage of Rebekah and Isaac conclude this story. It is concluded with a number of intriguing touches that neatly wrap up the story. Rebekah presents herself to Isaac as his intended; the phrase "she took her veil and covered herself" is a reference to the custom that the bride was veiled until their wedding night, and indicated her desire to marry the intended husband. It is intriguing that the servant takes Rebekah directly to Isaac; this would have been unacceptable practice if Abraham were still alive, both because it was Abraham who had sent the servant on this mission and because Abraham was the patriarch. Finally, the reference to Isaac bringing Rebekah "into his mother Sarah's tent" meant that Rebekah had replaced the dead Sarah as the matriarch of the family, filling a role and function that had been left vacant with Sarah's death. Therefore, "Isaac was comforted after his mother's death", in that there was now someone to head the daily operation of the household and to fill the role of the matriarch, and Isaac no longer had to live in the uncertainty of coping with the lack of management of the economic and social affairs of the family. In other words, the author is nicely telling us that Rebekah "took over"!

The final observation is the peculiar role that Isaac played throughout this entire story, as well as the stories about Isaac that both precede and follow this incident. Given that this story is about

¹ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 184.

the choice of a wife for Isaac, he is amazingly compliant and placid. Consider this. It was Abraham who initiated the search for Isaac's wife; there is no indication that Isaac had anything to do with it. It is the servant who undertakes the search; Isaac doesn't even see his intended spouse until long after all agreements have been made. It is Rebekah who makes the decision to marry Isaac. Nowhere in the record does Isaac make a decision to marry her; he only accedes to the decision already made for him. Isaac doesn't even take the first step toward Rebekah (he's simply walking in the field, not even anticipating her arrival). She makes the first move toward him (getting off the camel to meet him and veiling herself) He is obviously relieved that Rebekah will assume responsibility for the management of the household, so that he no longer needs to shoulder that responsibility. Both in this story and in each incident recorded of Isaac's life, he is always assuming a passive and compliant role, not one of action and decision. Thus, the author of Genesis wants to make clear that it is through the arrival of Rebekah that the future of the Abrahamic lineage depends. It will be through becoming Jacob's mother and then contending for him in the family that salvation history will be written. Isaac, on the other hand, is only important as a link between Abraham and Jacob, so that the family line can continue. Given Isaac's personality, this was why it was so important that God would choose Rebekah as the key player that would continue God's intentions that all humanity would be blessed through the planting of this family in Canaan 3,000 years ago.

Psalm 45:10-17 is an unusual psalm because it describes the sexual desire and tension of the approaching wedding of the king and his virgin princess, and their mutual longing for its soon consummation. Thus, it bears much more resemblance to the writing of the Song of Solomon than it does to the psalms!

The psalm begins with a brief introduction in which the author prays for inspiration. "My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe" (vs. 1). A "goodly theme" can be better translated "a good word" or "a sweet melody". It is as if the psalmist is so overwhelmed with the joy of his master and soon-to-be mistress that it is as if his heart has composed this delightful song all on its own; the melody and words have simply come gushing out! So here is this flood of praise.

The first part of the psalm is a eulogy of the king (vss. 2-9), the second of the king's new bride (vss. 10-16), and then, finally, the concluding promise to the king and his nation as the result of this eventful marriage (vs. 16-17). The king is eulogized in the first part in three ways: his physical beauty (vs. 2), his wise, compassionate and strong rule (vss. 3-5), and his capacity to sexually continue and even to strengthen the Davidic dynasty (vss. 6-7).

In this section of praise for the king, there are three particularly striking statements. The first is in verse 4. The standard translation of the passage reads "In your majesty ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right". But that is a weak translation. A much better translation of the Hebrew would be "Ride triumphantly in the cause of truth, and defend the poor".

The second is in verse 7. The standard translation is "you love righteousness and hate wickedness". But the much-more gutsy translation of the Hebrew that captures the passage's

emotion would better be, “You must love justice and hate iniquity”. In other words, in both verses 4 and 7, the psalmist is declaring as the responsibility of the king – even as he is approaching his own wedding bed – to be that of working for justice, especially in regards to the poor. The truly effective king to Israel was a king who neither secured the nation against its national enemies nor built the wealth of the nation. Rather, he was one who was committed to justice for all but was particularly concerned for the plight of the widow, the orphan, the impoverished and the “stranger who is within your gates”. Even when approaching the matter of the marriage of the king and the securing of his dynasty, the true success of an Israelite king was determined by his commitment to the plight of the nation’s poor!

The third striking statement is found in verse 6. “Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever; your royal scepter is a scepter of equity”. When one reads this verse, it seems as if the psalmist has suddenly shifted focus from the king to Yahweh. But that is not the case. The Hebrew would be better read, not “O God” but “O divine one”! That is, it is a reference to a human being – the king – who is almost divine-like in his faithful following of the mission to which he has been called as king: working for the equitable distribution of wealth and the equitable practice of justice.

This passage is unlike any other in the Bible, for it comes the closest to associating divinity with human rule. This was a concept most other cultures of the time embraced with fervor, from the Egyptians who, a thousand years before this psalm was written, saw their Pharaoh as being an incarnation of their supreme god to the Romans two thousand years later who worshipped the divine “genius” of their emperor. But to the Hebrew people, only Yahweh was God, for no one shared divinity with him. And yet, there is this peculiar passage, perhaps written by a psalmist who got a little carried away with joy over his king’s coming marriage. It is intriguing, however, how the author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews uses this passage to suggest that the Messiah is God’s “anointed” or “divine one” (Heb. 1:8-9)!

But the psalm then shifts from focus on the king to attention being paid to his bride (45:10-16). She enters the marriage hall, and there is as if a gasp goes up from the crowd at her profound beauty. “The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes she is led to the king; behind her the virgins, her companions, follow” (vss. 13b-14). Earlier, the soon-to-be princess has taken leave of her family; “forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty” (vs. 10-11a). She processes “from ivory palaces” accompanied by “stringed instruments (that) make (her) glad”, she who is clothed “in gold of Ophir” (vss. 8-9). In referring to the about-to-become-queen, the author wants to make two impressions upon the reader: first, her striking beauty which is a sign of her great fecundity; second, the wealth of a king who can adorn her so that she becomes adorable, not just to the king, but to all the men of the realm who stand in open-mouthed awe as she passes before them!

The psalm then reaches its conclusion. “In the place of ancestors you, O king, shall have sons; you will make them princes in all the earth. I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations; therefore, the people will praise you forever and ever” (vss. 16-17). The reward for being a faithful king, working for justice and fulfilling his responsibility toward the people, is that the king will “win fair maiden” who will produce for him a dynasty, so that his nation will know justice and equity for all its people – from the poorest to the highest – and they will

practice “shalom” together! That is the fate of the truly faithful king, queen and people! And for that reality, the people will be forever grateful.

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 is a love song spoken by the woman, as she awaits the visit of her lover. Both this passage and the entire book are a rhapsody of love, the exquisite expression of sexual love and its longings that can no longer be stifled. Reading it reminds the reader of what it is like to be deeply in love.

The Song of Solomon has been interpreted in the past (especially in Roman and medieval times) as a description of Christ’s love for the church – perhaps because it was too hard for celibates to cope with the clear and overt sexuality of the work. But it is a reminder to us of the power, single-mindedness and all-consuming reality of sexual love, one that helps us to understand the sheer relationality of love – whether it be physical between two lovers, or whether it be between God and his people.

Perhaps the most insightful understanding of the Song of Solomon is given by R.C. Sproul in his commentary on that book. It is lengthy, but it is worth reading in its entirety and then reflecting upon.

“Many interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, have regarded the Song as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or the Church. The association of the book with Solomon, however, points us in the direction of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Wisdom literature is distinguished, among other things, by its focus on the common sphere of human relationships. The Book of Proverbs uses language similar to that of the Song of Solomon in talking about marital love (Prov. 5:15-19), the subject of the Song. This love must finally be seen in the context of the even greater love of God that the Bible as a whole reveals. The beauty and worth of sexual love is affirmed at the beginning of the Bible, where the difference and relationship of the sexes is associated with the creation of humanity in God’s image (Gen. 1:27; cf. 2:19-25). If sexual love were evil in itself, it would be inappropriate as an allegory of Christ’s love for His church.

“The Song of Solomon reveals three qualities of love between a man and a woman: self-giving, desire, and commitment. In all these ways love reflects the greater love of God our Creator. God delights in us and gives Himself to us. God desires us wholly for Himself. God feels deeply both the pain and pleasure of His relationship with us. Although it is not proper to attribute sexuality to God, there is an analogy between the love we experience in marriage and the love that God has for us. The Old Testament prophets compare the love of God for His people to the love of a bridegroom for the bride (e.g., Jer. 2:2; Hos. 2:14-20). Christian marriage, according to Paul, should be modeled on the most perfect expression of such love, the self-giving love of Christ for His church and its willing response (Eph. 5:22, 33). The climax of the Song of Solomon is the praise of vehement and faithful love (8:6-7).

“The Song of Solomon shows us love outside Eden, not free from sorrow, but still beautiful and a reflection of God’s own love for us. It looks back to the gift of love in creation, and forward to the perfection of love in one greater than Solomon, the Lord Jesus Christ.”²

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 is the remembrance by the woman of a most special encounter she had with her lover. She begins by telling us that the man comes speedily to the woman’s house, with all the speed and determination of a gazelle or a stag in heat (vv. 8-9a). He arrives at her home and peers through the latticework of the windows, searching for her (vs. 9b). Then the man spies her and speaks to her. He reminds her that it is springtime, when the whole earth is awakening from its winter slumber, and has become fecund and receptive and open again (vv. 10-13a). So he invites the woman to come out from her house and to join him in lovemaking. “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away” (v. 13b).

Although the lectionary does not finish the poem (it continues through vs. 17), the remainder tells us that the lover has his doubts that she will come away with him for love-making, for she is like “the clefts of the rock, the covert of the cliff” (vs. 14), impregnable to his suit.

But she tells him that “the little foxes” (that is, her former suitors) “ruin the vineyard” (that is, have tempted her in the past). So now, she is not only tempted but more than willing to go with him for a time of joyous love-making. So “until the day breathes and the shadows flee” (that is, all night long), “turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains” (that is, be like a stag in heat and come, take my body and breasts) (vs. 17)! Nothing shy about her!

Matthew 11:16-30 is divided into two parts, vss. 16-24 dealing with the prophetic role of Jesus and vss. 25-30 describing God’s way of doing empire (the kingdom of God) and how that impacts each individual within it.

The first part presents the prophetic role of Jesus as he lays out the inevitable consequences of the actions of both the people and the systems of Israel. For the passage to be truly comprehended, one must begin back at verse 7 and Jesus’ statement about John the Baptist. He commends John the Baptist’s ministry by declaring, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes (i.e., the establishment) are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (11:7-11).

In this passage, Jesus commends John the Baptist to the people. He contrasts John, his raiment and his message with Israel’s political, economic and religious elite “who wear soft robes” and “are in royal palaces”. John, on the other hand is a prophet who afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. But John is more than a prophet, Jesus declares, for he is the one predicted by the prophet Malachi (3:1; 4:5) who is to precede the Messiah and is to announce his

² R.C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), p. 935.

coming – the One who will call Israel’s and Rome’s systems and leaders to accountability and who will establish God’s empire of justice, equity and unity upon the earth.

After commending John the Baptist, Jesus then gets to his real topic – the primary point he wants to make. He declares, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (vs. 12). What does Jesus mean by this strange statement?

What Jesus is declaring is that the kingdom of God is revolutionary! The very nature of God’s intentions for humanity turns the world and the world’s systems upside-down. It is so revolutionary that, if it is taken seriously and fully practiced, its implementation will seem like violence against the systems. This is seen, Jesus says, by the contradictory responses of the systems and the people to those who proclaim the Jubilee (that is, Jesus and John). Jesus then describes in two ways the violent response of the systems and the violence done to them by God’s intentions.

First, Jesus presents how people will respond to his message and actions. “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn’. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (vss. 16-19).

It is in this passage that one gets the first clue in the Gospel of Matthew at the frustration Jesus must have been feeling in his ministry. Up until this point, one would summarize Matthew’s description of Jesus’ ministry as being immensely successful, with large crowds following him, profound healings occurring, the people being fed and ministered to, and positive responses to his preaching. But in reality, this passage is telling us that Jesus saw it quite differently. He recognized that, whereas there were large crowds and responsive people, on the whole the people were coming to these gatherings out of curiosity, excitement or self-interest. It was not simply that Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders were critical of and even rejecting Jesus because they saw him as a threat to their hegemony. It was that the ordinary people were not taking either John or Jesus all that seriously. They would use both men for the people’s benefit (getting healed, getting fed, being encouraged), but they weren’t going to commit themselves to either man or their messages, and join their ranks as followers committed to the hard work of building a just society, equitably sharing their wealth, eliminating poverty, and placing the interests of God and God’s kingdom ahead of their own!

Jesus expresses his frustration in an extremely powerful way. There’s no satisfying you people, Jesus is in essence declaring. You want me to feed you, to heal you, to preach love to you and not call you to accountability for not pursuing God’s kingdom. And John and I did that. But you always wanted more! You always want more! You are like unsatisfied children who always expect more and have no restraints.

You Israelites have been profoundly blessed. You are not only blessed by your rich spiritual tradition going back 2,000 years to Abraham, and by the covenant made between God and

Moses. You have been privileged as no other generation has been blessed, because over this year of combined ministry, you have had the greatest of all of Israel's prophets (John the Baptist), and you have had me – Jesus – the Messiah himself in person!

And yet what have you done with this rich blessing? You have ignored, both as leaders and as a people, the living out of the shalom community inaugurated by Abraham, codified in the Law of Moses, and taught and at least to some degree implemented by the prophets. But you have also been deeply critical of the very ones – John and Jesus – who have brought God's blessings to you today. You have viewed John, who was God's agent, as the devil's agent and have dismissed his warning. And you see me, Jesus, the Son of Man, your Messiah, as a "glutton and drunkard".

Jesus points out that both Israel's political leaders and its people make two accusations against him and his ministry. First, he is a "glutton and drunkard", a "party animal". That term, "glutton and drunkard" is not simply a description of Jesus' eating and drinking habits. It is a powerful insult that is used throughout the scripture (e.g. Deut. 21:18-21) for a rebellious son who is creating such chaos with his father's birthright (whether a farm or a kingdom) that he deserves to be put to death! Thus, Jesus is seen by both Israel's leaders and people, not as one doing the will of God but so acting against God's will for the nation that he needs to be eliminated! Second, Jesus is described as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners". That is, he has built his ministry around the wrong people, showing mercy and compassion toward the very people who most corrupt Israel – tax-collectors (who are traitors of the Jews and collaborators with the enemy) and "sinners" (people who are the immoral lowlife of the nation and secularists who reject God and the Law). Therefore, even though he preaches great sermons and both heals and feeds the people, this Jesus is an immense threat to this nation and needs to be eliminated! And the importance of this revelation by Jesus is that it is not only Israel's political, economic and religious leaders saying this (one would expect that of them); it is the ordinary people, as well!

Jesus ends this critique with an intriguing statement: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (vs. 19b). This seems an ambiguous sentence, difficult to interpret. But it is made far more transparent if one were to capitalize the word "wisdom", so that it would read "Yet Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds".

Jesus is referring back to the use of the word "wisdom" in the book of Proverbs (Prov. 8-9, for example), in which wisdom is personified rather than simply being a characteristic of knowledge, insight or judgment. In other words, Jesus is referring to himself. He is "Wisdom" (captured in capitalizing it into a proper noun rather than a common noun). "Jesus is vindicated by his deeds". Earlier in this chapter, when John's disciples asked Jesus whether he was the Messiah, Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (11:5-6). So now Jesus is telling the people, "Look at my deeds (that is, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them) and decide whether my message is true, and whether you should convert from your self-centered priorities and start working for God's kingdom." If you do convert, you will discover

that Jesus is indeed God's agent who reveals God's intentions for you and for the world, and who calls you to join the revolution!

Through this evaluation of the people, Jesus is avoiding the error that most revolutionaries make – the assumption that the people are good and the systems are evil. Life is not quite as simple as that! This statement that is so critical of the masses that follow him is an indication that Jesus saw the people as much infected with the virus of original sin as were their leaders and the systems those leaders both served and help create. All that the people lacked was opportunity. But given the opportunity, they would act in as oppressive, exploitive and dominating ways as do their leaders. For all human beings are infected with a lust for power, greed and the need to control, no matter how gentle or generous or relational they may seem. Evil motives as well as actions permeate all that we are and do.³ And unless we acknowledge that reality and create systems that balance and check that reality, we are destined to repeat the sins of both our corporate and individual past!

Jesus now moves from a criticism of the people to a criticism of the systems. But in doing so, he includes in his social analysis of the systems a most profound dimension that has not previously appeared in his critique.

Second, Jesus presents how the cities, as corporate units and their systems will respond to his message and actions. In the next section of scripture, Matthew 11:20-24 (which, unhappily, is eliminated from the lectionary), Jesus speaks woes to unrepentant cities. Matthew tells us, "Then Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you'" (vss. 20-24).

This passage presents a profound leap in Jesus' message. Up until this point, he has spoken truth to power by assailing the political, economic and religious leaders of Israel. And he has spoken against their systems, analyzing the nature of the evil that they are doing. But never before has he spoken against the corporate entity of a city. Here he does in what is a most profound statement.

It is important to observe what Matthew did not write. He did not write, "Jesus began to reproach the leaders of the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done" but instead "he began to reproach the cities". Jesus did not say, "Woe to you, leaders of Chorazin", but "Woe to you, Chorazin". The judgment is spoken against the cities, not simply against that

³ The doctrine of total depravity is not that there is no good in people or society. It is that our beings and institutions are thoroughly permeated with sin. Human depravity and self-serving creeps into every thought, intent and action we do. Thus, there is no such thing as a pure motive, for even the most apparently-generous act is influenced by our needs for recognition, influence, self-serving and control. And if were honest or perceptive enough about our own motives, we would recognize that reality!

city's political, economic and religious leadership or even the systems that they led. The entire city stands condemned because of their sin.

By the very words he speaks, Jesus is indicating that the cities themselves could be held as accountable for their refusal to believe every bit as much as individuals could be held accountable. The cities had the capacity to respond positively to Jesus' jubilee vision – and they refused it.

But how could an inanimate object refuse anything? And how could an inanimate object be held accountable? Simply because, to Hebrew thinking, the city wasn't an inanimate object, an organized collection of stone and mortar and brick. The city was imbued with its own spirituality, a spirituality that was fostered in it by the decisions made by their political, economic and religious leaders and by the embracing of those decisions by the people (e.g., Deut. 32:8-9; II Kings 19:35-36; Pss. 29:1; 82:1-2; 89:6; Isa. 14:12-15; Dan. 10:1—11:2; Rom. 8:38-39; Eph. 1:18-22; 3:8-11; 6:10-12; Col. 1:14-20; Rev. 2—3; see chapter 3 of my book, *City of God; City of Satan* [Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1991], pp. 64-79).

But how can a city repent? How can a corporate entity change its course? It is through that city's or nation's systems changing because of the decisions of their leaders that a corporate entity can repent. All of people empowerment and community organizing theory is based on the assumption that a political, economic or values-establishing entity can make a decision which then moves that entity and the society it influences in new and just directions. All social legislation is based upon that assumption. And that is what Matthew is talking about in this passage.

But if a system and the leaders of that system refuse to act in just, relational and equitable ways, then its fate is sure. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you!”

Matthew 11 has dealt thus far with the revolutionary values of Jesus' upside-down kingdom, and the ways both the dominating systems and the people opt against that kingdom in favor of their own control and domination. That analysis ends, however, with a most intriguing statement by Jesus.

“At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“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” (11:25-30).

Jesus is making two distinct but related points in this closing section of his argument. The first is that those who are the leaders of the dominating systems are often some of the most highly educated and knowledgeable people in that society. And because they are so well informed and smart, the ordinary people will tend to obediently follow them, relying on that knowledge. Thus, the powerful can devise and push their own agendas, agendas designed to corner all the power, wealth and influence for their own benefit. And because the people will so respect, admire and even be intimidated by these intelligent leaders that they will support them, support their policies (even when they work against the people's good) and defend the status quo (because even the most repressive regime is preferable in its predictability than the chaos of change).

But do not confuse intelligence with wisdom, Jesus is saying. In spite of their skills, knowledge and erudition, these leaders lack discernment. They cannot see the systems they are creating and maintaining for what they really are, because they concentrate upon their intentions (which are often honorable) rather than their actions. Likewise, the people can't allow themselves to see the inevitable results of the ways these systems operate, because the people have too much at stake in preserving its status quo.

But this is not true for "infants"! Infants have no investment in the systems. They are not committed to maintaining the dominating systems nor their leadership. Therefore, God can reveal to them the reality of God's kingdom (the shalom community), and they will be open and receptive to it. And through whom will God reveal to "infants" the empire God intends for humanity? God will reveal such truth through his Son, because "all things have been handed over to (him) by the Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him". The way to really understand God's intentions for the world, God's freeing of us from the clutches of the lust for power, greed and control, and our joining of God's efforts to transform this world into the kingdom of his Son is to follow that One who is "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners"!

The second thing Jesus is saying in this section is an invitation to those who are "weary" with a world controlled and ruled by dominating systems. That invitation is to embrace Jesus and the kingdom Jesus has come to bring about. "Take upon yourself," Jesus is saying, "the yoke of the Shalom Community – of God's Kingdom – and you will find it surprisingly light. That which looks both impossible and improbable – a society which so stewards and distributes its wealth that there are no poor in its midst, a political order truly just, a values-system centering the society and each individual in a dynamic relationship with God – can indeed happen! And when it does happen, it will be good news for all! In fact, in the process of its happening, it will be good news! Even in the sharing of its dream, it will be good news! You will discover that Jesus is a gentle and humble Caesar, you will find his yoke weighing little and sitting easily on your shoulders, and you, as a people and as individuals, "will find rest for your souls". This is the promise of the kingdom-work from Jesus. And it is a promise intended for all of us who work today for that kingdom!

Romans 7:15-25a is Paul's amazing testimony to the struggle within himself between evil and good. In presenting this battle, Paul is both providing theological content and personal testimony

to Jesus' penetrating critique of both people and their systems found in our Gospel lesson for this Sunday. And Paul does so, not by resorting to theological analysis or description, but simply by telling of his own internal struggles.

Paul writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (7:15-25a)!

Biblical scholars, disturbed by this passage, have come at it from several directions. Some have contended that Paul is simply describing the unregenerate person, but personalizing it by using the pronoun "I" (not meaning himself at all). Others have suggested that Paul is describing a Christian who is living in the "flesh". Others have contended that Paul is describing the transitional phase of a Christian from initial salvation toward full sanctification, but is not yet living a sinless life. But the large majority of biblical scholars reject these three options, feeling that these are simply excuses for not dealing directly and honestly with what Paul wrote.

This passage is nothing other than Paul's confessional. He is simply stating the spiritual struggle that faces him each day. The grounds for making that conclusion are threefold. First, it is the obvious reading of the passage (a primary rule of biblical exegesis is to read the passage in its obvious and direct meaning, not spiritualizing or symbolizing or transferring it in order to try to explain away its obvious meaning). Second, it is consistent with the entire message of the chapter, the chapters immediately preceding it and the chapter following it. Finally, it is written in the first person and in the present tense; it is Paul's testimony of his present condition as he applies what he has previously written about the law to his own life.

What Paul is simply saying is that he has two natures at war within himself, and that these two natures express themselves through his actions. He is redeemed by Christ; there is no question in Paul's mind about that. He was chosen by Christ. He has been called to Christ. In his death, Christ has done all that is necessary to bring about Paul's redemption. Paul has believed in that saving work and has been, in truth, redeemed.

But this doesn't mean that Paul is sinless! He is still quite competent to sin – competent and practiced at it! In fact, he's pretty good at sinning! He may belong to Christ, but there is still in him the primal capacity and inclination to act selfishly, to seek to amass power, to act greedily and to treat people unilaterally rather than relationally. Sin runs deeply within him as it does with us all.

Paul brilliantly describes the human condition – even the redeemed human condition – in a way with which all of us (if we are being honest about ourselves) resonate. "I do not do what I want,

but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” Paul goes as far as to say, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand”. He is not here referring to the Mosaic Law, but rather is saying “I act so often to do the evil when I want to do the good that I can almost say, this is a rule of life – a predictable response”.

In sharing this testimony, Paul is personalizing a Hebrew belief. The rabbis of Paul’s day taught that every human being had two natures within him, the *Yetser hatob* and the *Yetser hara*. God had made each human being with both a good and an evil impulse within him, and his entire life was one of warring between these two for dominance. Thus, each person and each society was a battle ground between the *Yetser hatob* and the *Yetser hara*, with both the evil impulse and the good impulse battling for supremacy.

This was why the Law was so important to Jews. Rabbi ben Sirach wrote, “God created for you the evil impulse; God also created for you the law as an antiseptic. If you occupy yourself with the law, you will not fall into the power of the evil impulse”.⁴ It was obedience to and strict observance of the Law that would keep one concentrated upon the good impulse, so that the evil impulse in one would atrophy. As ben Sirach put it, “the Law is an antiseptic”.

But Paul knew this wasn’t true. Elsewhere he testified, “(I was) circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:5-6). Yet, Paul knew that even his strict obedience to the Law had not stopped the power of evil within him. The fact is, Paul testifies in this passage, even as we seek to follow Christ, evil is within us and is always seeking to orient our lives toward domination, oppression and exploitation of others. Do not underestimate either the evil within you or its capacity to conquer you.

In such a dilemma, what can we do? How do I conquer the wretchedness of my own evil nature? What must I do to be set free from the power of “sin and death”?

Paul responds, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (7:25a). And then Paul leads us into the eighth chapter of Romans, where he develops exactly what God has done for us through Jesus Christ that sets us free from the domination and control of personal and social evil in our lives (it doesn’t eliminate it in this life; it sets us free of its constraints). But his answer is caught up in that single sentence which concludes the Epistle Lesson for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Paul’s answer is simply this: “In the final analysis, there is nothing you can do to conquer the wretchedness of your own evil nature or to set you free from the domination and control of personal and social evil. There is nothing you can do about it! It has already been done for you through “Jesus Christ our Lord”. That is why we give “thanks to God” for God’s act of deliverance.”

⁴ Rabbi ben Sirach, *Writings*, 15:21-22; see William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 98-100.

We cannot save ourselves. Only God can save us. We cannot save the world. Only God through Christ can. In the final analysis, it is all grace! It is the “amazing grace” of “God through Jesus Christ our Lord” that sets us free from the influence and power of evil that is both within us and that comes forth from us to impact our world. And because of the freedom that we experience under that “amazing grace”, we can begin to understand and acknowledge the evil impulses that still lie within us but need not dominate us as we allow God to do God’s transformational work within us at the same time as we seek to engage the world as a liberated people, working for the world’s transformation into the “kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ”!

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