

Matchmaker, Matchmaker

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 27, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

It was the last Friday in July of 1918. My father was a handsome, twenty five year old, Army First Lieutenant stationed about five miles outside Petersburg, Virginia, at Fort Lee. He was wearing his uniform and riding his horse back to camp when his eyes lighted upon a beautiful 18 year old woman sitting on her parent's front porch. In front of her house was a watering trough. In those days there were more horses than cars. He stopped, got off his horse, removed his broad brimmed officer's hat, politely bowed (according to my mother's story) and said, "Lieutenant Atkinson, mam. May I water my horse?" It was love at first drink. That happened on the last Friday of July in 1918. They were married, ^{6 weeks}~~two months~~ later, on September 7, 1918. After the ceremony my father immediately returned to Camp Lee and my mother and her parents returned home. On September 14, the week after they got married, and having never been together by themselves privately, whatsoever (if you get my drift), my father left for France and World War I. He returned safely in March of 1919 after having brought the war to an end, and nine months after that ^{he got back}~~that~~ my oldest sister was born.

Match-making, today, can be quite different. Today, some busy people look for a spouse through newspaper ads. Listen to this one which actually appeared in the personal section of a newspaper a couple of years ago:

NEVER MARRIED MALE - Honest, gentle, affectionate, widely traveled college professor- writer, PhD, seeks spiritual, intelligent, gentle female age 40-50 for a meaningful relationship. I enjoy jazz, metaphysics, dressing as a woman, and dining out.

I wondered how many women responded. After all, how many women really enjoy jazz?

Personally, I prefer match-making the old fashioned way.

The Bible has a number of stories that deal with match-making. Rebekah's marriage to

Isaac is just one of many. God works in this story as an unseen Match-maker, guiding and directing personal decisions and desires in answer to prayer. There's no hint of fatalism here. Human effort and decisions are real, but behind those efforts and decisions God is silently at work.

Let me summarize the story. Near the end of his life Abraham took upon himself the responsibility to find a wife for ^{40 year old, 40 year married son} Isaac. He sent his oldest and most trusted servant, Eliezer, to his home country to seek a wife for his son. "Swear... that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." "But what if the woman is not willing to follow me to this land?" Eliezer asked. And Abraham responded in faith, "The LORD, the God of heaven... will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there." The servant did as Abraham had instructed him and was led directly to Rebekah. The narrator described Rebekah with these words: "The maiden was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known." After hearing the story of Abraham's servant, Rebekah and her family agreed to her marriage, even though she had never seen Isaac. She return with the servant. "Then", we read, "Isaac brought her into the tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her." This story contains several rules for match-making.

Rule One: It's best if both marriage partners share the same faith. Abraham was concerned that Isaac not marry a Canaanite women. His concern had nothing to do with race and everything to do with religion. Abraham didn't want Isaac to marry outside the people of God. John Calvin comments, "since God had separated Abraham from the Canaanites by a sacred covenant, he justly fears lest Isaac, by joining himself with them, should shake off the yoke of God." This concern that God's people marry within the covenant is expressed throughout the Bible.

There's a widespread feeling that religion is merely a matter of taste and has nothing to do with public truth. A man may prefer chocolate ice cream and a woman, vanilla, yet they might have a wonderful marriage because ones favorite flavor of ice cream is a matter of private taste. Likewise, many people feel that religion is simply a matter of taste. Some people prefer Christianity and others prefer another religion or no religion at all, but, since religion is a private thing, it should have no effect on a happy marriage. Christians, however, believe that the Christian faith is not merely a private thing like a personal taste. We believe that salvation comes through Christ alone. We believe that the authority of Jesus will be vindicated in history one day. The Christian faith is not simply a personal taste. When Christians say, "Jesus is Lord" we are making a truth claim and not simply expressing a personal opinion.

If couples don't share core beliefs there's bound to be trouble. Look at it practically. The Christian wife wants to go to Sunday School and Church and the non-religious husband wants to go boating every Sunday. Either she will suppress her faith in the interests of a stable marriage or she will threaten the happiness of her marriage in the interest of maintaining a close relationship with the Lord. That's not a good situation to be in. A Christian's purpose in life is to glorify and enjoy God forever. How can there be deep, intimate, abiding happiness in a marriage if one person enjoys God and the other is indifferent?

We should admit that, even if both spouses are deeply committed to Jesus Christ, there's no guarantee that their marriage will be a happy one. There are lots of factors that can affect whether a marriage is satisfactory for both of the people involved. Admitting this, however, it's still best that a Christian should always marry a Christian and a Christian should never marry a non-Christian.

Rule Two: It's best if a couple have their honeymoon after the marriage and not before.

This is how the narrator describes Rebekah: "The maiden was very fair to look upon, a virgin, whom no man had known." It's obvious that it was important to state that Rebekah had never had sexual relationships. The Biblical word for sexual relationships before marriage is "fornication", a rather old fashioned, Victorian sounding word. The Bible says, "Flee fornication!" The Biblical word for sexual relationships outside of marriage is "adultery". The Bible says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." St. Paul warned that those who continue in fornication or adultery will not enter the kingdom of God.

cf. Opulencia

One of the most serious errors, nowadays, is that people think they can prepare emotionally, financially and physically for marriage by living together for a while before they get married. Even secular sociological surveys indicate that, for a number of reasons, people who have sexual intercourse before marriage are less likely to have happy marriages than those who get married never having had any sexual experience.

Erma Bombeck, in one of her columns makes this distinction between living together and being married:

"We've gone through three wars, two miscarriages, five houses, three children, 17 cars, 23 funerals, seven camping trips, 12 jobs, 19 banks and three credit unions. I stopped counting slammed doors after 3,009. What do I have to show for it? A feeling of pride and contentment for having done something that isn't easy. A realization that there is someone outside of myself without whom I do not feel whole. Maybe the difference between living together and being married is the former is a spectator sport and the latter is playing the game by all the rules."

I read someplace that Planned Parenthood's data show that the number one reason teenagers engage in premarital sexual intercourse is peer pressure, and not hormone pressure. I believe that the number one reason many teenagers remain virgins is also peer pressure; the loving support of adults and fellow teenagers who believe that premarital sexual relations are harmful to them. One of the goals of our youth groups is to provide that kind of support.

"God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman,"

our marriage service declares. It's best to wait until after the marriage to have a honeymoon.

It's for the welfare & happiness of humankind

Rule Three: Marriage is not simply for personal fulfillment. Christian marriage is not simply a private matter; it's a social matter. Abraham's concern for Isaac's marriage wasn't simply that his son achieve some kind of self fulfillment. Abraham was concerned about doing his part to fulfill the promise that God made to him, to bless the world through his descendants.

Christians believe that marriage exists, not merely for self-fulfillment, but rather to help achieve the great ends of the covenant community, the church. The marriage service contains this prayer: "Enrich with your grace all husbands and wives, parents and children, that, loving and supporting one another, they may serve those in need and be a sign of your kingdom." Christian marriage is not an end in itself. It's a means to serve those in need. This view of marriage is far removed from what is commonly held today. God wants to use the institution of marriage to build a new and just society.

Rule Four: Be supportive of your children's marriages even if they marry a "Meathead" as Archie Bunker used to call his son-in-law. We can't arrange our children's marriages as Abraham did. Sometimes parents realize that a son or daughter is making a tragic choice. Nevertheless, I believe it's wise for parents, after they've calmly and reasonably stated all their objections, to say to their son or daughter, "I love you and I'll do everything in my power to be supportive of your marriage." The family of Rebekah asked her, "Will you go with this man?" She said, "I will go." The choice was Rebekah's. Her family must have had some anxiety. They may have had objections.[^] *They'd never met Isaac. Rebekah was young & Isaac in his 40's* But they sent her away with a blessing, not a curse. It's a tragedy when Christian parents withhold their blessing from what they believe

to be an unwise marriage. Marriage is difficult enough without having to endure the burden of a parental curse.

Let me review what I've said before closing. The story of Rebekah and Isaac remind us of four rules which may be found throughout the bible.

Rule One: It's best if both marriage partners share the same faith.

Rule Two: It's best if a couple has never had sexual intercourse before marriage with one another or with anyone else.

Rule Three: Marriage between members of the people of God is not merely for self fulfillment but for building God's promised new society.

Rule Four: Be supportive of your children's marriages.

Now let me say, in closing, that the Bible is very clear that not everybody should be married. In fact, the apostle Paul suggests that marriage is the exception rather than the norm. For Christians it's as good to be single as it is to be married. Singleness reminds us that the church grows not through biological reproduction but through witness and hospitality to the stranger. It's also very clear that the Lord would rather that we not marry at all rather than marry outside the family of God.

Maybe you've broken all the rules. You married someone who doesn't share your deep commitment to Jesus Christ. You had sexual relationships before you got married. You got married merely for self-fulfillment and without any thought to helping build God's new society. You've been critical of your child's marriage and withheld your blessing from them.

So you're a sinner just like the rest of us. Join the crowd! The first requirement for joining the Christian church is a confession of sin. We've all sinned in thought, word and deed. God is gracious. God forgives us poor sinners when we fail him. He sent his son who died on the cross to forgive us. We trust in Christ to forgive us. We're not condemned by past mistakes. God sent the Holy Spirit to enable us to obey God. Let's continually ask God for the grace to be faithful followers of Christ whether we're single or married.

Let us pray: God of grace, enrich with your grace all people, single, married, or divorced, parents and children, that loving

and supporting one another, they may serve those in need and be a sign of your kingdom. Grant that the bonds by which all your children are united to one another may be so transformed by your Spirit that your peace and justice may fill the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.