

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

Psalms 45: 11-18 or Song of Solomon 2: 8-13

Pentecost 6 2023.

Romans 7: 15-25a

St. Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

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“And they called Rebekah, and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ She said, ‘I will.’”

Genesis 24: 58

To begin with a real groaner of a joke: There is a story of a young man from central London, England, who had a cockney accent (he didn't pronounce his H's; he would say “Arry” when referring to “Harry”). But this young man had a very serious problem: He was very smitten with a young woman who lived nearby named “Karen.” And he was equally smitten with another young local woman named “Maria.” Karen or Maria? Maria or Karen?...

The young man knew it was wrong to date 2 different young women at the same time, and so he would have to choose... He didn't know what to do. So, although he was not a very religious young man, he decided to go to a local church, to see if he got any insight. So he went into a local Roman Catholic church, and much to his astonishment, he felt he got a very clear answer. There, by a statue of our Lord's blessed mother, with lighted candles, was what he took as very clear instructions from the Lord. In bold lettering were the words, “ ‘Ave Maria...”

Now, whether it's about making a decision about whom to date or to marry; about whether we should stick with our current job or to seek new employment; whether to stay or to move... – sooner or later, we are all confronted with important decisions to make. Sometimes these decisions weigh heavily on us...

As Christians, we believe that God has good, pleasing and perfect plan for our lives. As God surely knows what is best for us, our desire is to seek God's will, and to live it out... The challenge before us, though, is: When we are confronted with a difficult choice, how do we know God's will? How can we be confident that we will be seeking God's will – and not a less worthy substitute?...

We aren't the first ones to ponder about discerning God's perfect will. It is a question which faces us in the first reading for today, from Genesis 24...

We might remember that for the past couple of weeks, we have been learning more about Abraham, our ancient spiritual ancestor, and the vexing problem of Abraham having descendants... Well, today's reading takes place perhaps 25 or 30 years later: Isaac is now grown up. His mother Sarah is dead. It's time for Isaac to get married... In *our* culture, the expectation is that a young man will begin dating. In ancient Palestine, when family loyalties were so strong, it was the job of the father of the household to arrange a suitable marriage for his sons and his daughters...

So Abraham, Isaac's father, commissions a trusted servant to go back to the territory of Isaac's mother's family, to find a suitable wife for Isaac. (This trusted servant must have been under a lot of pressure!)

Here's the problem for this servant of Abraham: He needs to get this right! He needs to find a marriage-able young woman in a distant land, who's willing to leave her family -- and to travel with a stranger -- to meet and marry a relative she's never met; *and* she needs to be prepared to worship the God of Abraham and his Son Isaac...

Well, Abraham's God is this servant's God too... What do we do, when we don't know what to do?... We pray!... Abraham's servant has travelled a long way. No doubt he's hot and thirsty; the camels with him are hot and thirsty too. Abraham's servant wants God to show him the right young woman to approach... It's a little delicate: If he comes on too strong, a marriage-able young woman might think this dirty stranger at the well is a creep, and run away!...

Abraham's servant prays, essentially, Whichever young woman comes up, and offers a drink both for me *and* the camels, then I'll know that you're involved with this, God of my Master Abraham. I hope she'll be the one that Abraham's son Isaac is supposed to marry... Well, guess what! Up comes a young woman, who offers a drink of water to Abraham's servant and to the camels too. Surely this is a sign from the Lord!...

The servant doesn't mess around. Right away he gives her some substantial gifts -- bracelets; and gold nose-ring; and some money. Then he asks if he can go meet her family...

So, all this is the background to today's reading... In today's reading, we learn that the visit with Rebekah's family goes well. The family can see that Isaac has the financial means to look after Rebekah. They let Rebekah herself choose whether or not to go with the servant; and when she chooses to go, they send along Rebekah's nurse and a few servants, for an added measure of safety... The reading concludes with Isaac meeting and sleeping with Rebekah, after what must have been a very short time of introduction. She is now his wife...

So, the context of this whole story is about discerning who the right marriage partner is for Isaac, Abraham's son by Sarah... It's a story about discerning God's will...

Now, we are likely relieved that we don't have to ride a camel in the desert sun to find a suitable marriage partner for someone we care about. Nonetheless, although our culture is very different, we are often faced with the difficult question of discerning God's will for our lives, in important matters... How can we have reasonable confidence that we are seeking and identifying God's will?...

First, let's take time to get to know God's will, and not be in a hurry. Our human friendships thrive on communication. In the same way, our fellowship with God through

Jesus Christ, flourishes as we spend time with him. Time in prayer; time learning the content of the Bible; spending time with other Christians who are learning how to walk God's way; listening patiently and with open hearts, all help us to know God, and God's priorities...

In all my years in ordained ministry, when someone close to the Lord is seeking God's will and checking with me, I think they almost always have it right... In contrast, if I'm visiting someone who is on the parish list who comes to Church only at Christmas, if they begin quoting the Bible to me, they generally get it spectacularly wrong (or they're quoting from Shakespeare or their favourite singer, not the Bible at all!)... The point is, the more time we spend with *God*, the easier it is to know God's priorities...

Know God. Second, which choice is the more loving...? (Not necessarily the easier choice, but the more loving choice.) As scripture reads, "God is love, and those who abide in love and abide in God, and God in them (I John 4: 16)..."

First, Know God. Second, which choice is truly more loving? Third, I encourage us to speak with people we trust in the congregation. There are a lot of wise people here. Proverbs 11: 14 reads, "In abundance of counselors there is victory." Proverbs 12:15 reads, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel..."

Fourthly, do we have peace with the decision we're inclined toward? The Lord doesn't want us to be miserable; he wants us to carry his peace. First Corinthians 14 reads, "For our God is not a God of disorder, but of peace..." Having peace about a decision we have made means we are more likely to have discerned his good, pleasing and perfect will...

There are other ways of discerning God's will too. Some people look carefully to the example of the great saints in the Church's history. Others pay special attention to dreams, and so forth...

However, these are, I suggest, some good guidelines, whether we're planning a family, or whatever big decision we need to make: Know God. Don't be in a hurry. Is it loving? What do wise people suggest? Do we have peace?...

May we be filled with God's peace, which surpasses all understanding, through Jesus Christ; now and for ever.

Amen.