

Sermon for Sunday, July 9, 2023

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

“God the Matchmaker?”

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Decorah, Iowa

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

My family often teases me about how little I know of pop culture. One of the few ways I learn anything about it is through the public radio news quiz show *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me* which is not what you'd call cutting edge. I'm such an NPR nerd. Still, I learn some stuff there.

Last week the featured guest on *Wait, Wait ...* was Aleeza Ben Shalom, star of a new Netflix show called *Jewish Matchmaking*. Apparently, this is a spinoff on the show *Indian Matchmaking*. My ears perked up as the Jewish Matchmaker was introduced because I've been pondering how God plays matchmaker for Isaac and Rebekah. I've also been wondering a bit, doesn't God have more important things to do than arranging marriages?

I mean, maybe in the case of Rebekah and Isaac it makes sense. Isaac is part of the chosen family, blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. He needs to get married so that the family will carry on, so that God can continue to bless the world through them. There's a larger purpose at work. For that reason, it makes sense that God meddles to make sure they meet, court, and get married. Their marriage isn't just so that they will have a nice life together. It's about the whole human race.

But generally, is God's finger really in most human relationships pushing us together, arranging marriages, making sure we meet friends and mentors? Doesn't God have better things to do? The rabbis didn't think so. The ancient Jewish rabbis, who were the first interpreters of scripture, saw God as the ultimate matchmaker.

There's a fun portion of midrash, rabbinical teaching, that describes God this way. Rabbi Yose bar Halafta was asked by a Roman matron: "You claim that your God created the world in six days. Then what has He been doing since then?" Rabbi Yose replied, "All this time the Holy One has been making matches." "That is no great feat!" declared the matron. "I can do that just as well." But Rabbi Yose warned her: "It is not as simple as you think. The Holy One, blessed be He, considers making matches as difficult as splitting the Red Sea."

That's something to ponder. Maybe making matches all day, every day, is what God does. Maybe that's how God transforms the world - through matchmaking. Which is to say, through nurturing human relationships. Maybe, since the beginning of time, God has been working to bring people together. Not only so that we will have nice lives, but also so that we can bless the world through our marriages and families, our friendships, communities, and congregations, through the ways we live together with one another.

As I've pondered that this week, I keep thinking about my Grandma, who is 101 years old, and all her relationships. Grandma was orphaned by the time she was thirteen, during the Great Depres-

sion. She got through because family friends brought her into their home and because her older siblings helped out. When Grandma was twenty, she fell in love, got married to my grandpa, and soon they were expecting a child, my dad. But then grandpa was sent to Italy to fight in World War II. He was killed there about a month before my dad was born.

For ten years Grandma raised my dad on her own and they were so close. Then she remarried and had five more kids. My dad was so happy to have siblings. He graduated from high school the same month the youngest two, his twin sisters, were born. Grandma's second marriage ended in a painful divorce. Yet she remains so grateful that it gave her five more wonderful kids. One of the most painful losses for Grandma was the death of her son, my dad. He died of cancer when he was just sixty-three years old. Grandma misses him terribly, as do his siblings, my aunts and uncles. They honor dad's memory and tend to Grandma's grief and to all of our grief so beautifully.

I see that God has nourished and sustained Grandma through other people as she's faced so many challenges. Her relationships have been a blessing to her and to others. They have served God's purposes for her and for all of us - healing, well-being, blessing, hope. I do believe God has been a matchmaker in my Grandma's life, that God has been involved in all the relationships that have brought her joy and pain. I believe God has been working in all of it to heal and transform her and the world around her. Grandma has learned and has taught her family that we live not for ourselves, but for one another and for other people.

I also believe God is a matchmaker in each of our lives. Our stories may not be as epic as Isaac and Rebekah's, or even as my Grandma's, but God blesses us and others through our relationships. God is intimately involved. When our bonds are loving and healthy, God is at work to strengthen them. When they are conflicted and painful, God is at work to heal and help. God accompanies us in all the joys and sorrows of our lives, and our lives together with others.

So maybe God *is* the ultimate matchmaker. And, as people made in God's image we are called to be matchmakers too, not in the Jewish Matchmaker sense. We probably won't have to star in a Netflix show. Yet God does ask us to nurture relationships so that as families, congregations, and communities we can care for others and pass on faith, sharing the good news that God is intimately involved in the world and in our lives.

That's what we're doing with the Shepherd and Flock Ministry. It's why we're doing a youth trip to build relationships with one another and with neighbors in Waterloo.

Today, God meets us here, meets you here at the wellspring of the baptismal font and at the table to heal, forgive and renew you for this holy work of tending to relationships and blessing the world.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.