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Lesson: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 // Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

[Jesus spoke to the crowd saying:] ¹⁶“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹the 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.”

²⁵At 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; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All 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. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

My family and I were at Lutheridge this past week in the mountains of North Carolina. Although our experience with Lutheridge goes back decades, this was the first time any of us were a part of what is called the Family Camp program. The idea behind Family Camp is that entire households can have the Lutheridge experience, not just kids and teenagers. The program this week had campers ranging from a small baby to some folks in their eighties. One recurring thought I had throughout the week was that I didn’t know which kids belonged to which parents, because we all got along and intermingled. The theme for the week was “Beloved: Be loved.” In a nutshell, God initiates the relationship by declaring us beloved, then we allow ourselves to have the experience of

finding our identity in being loved by God, and from that going out to love others. Our lessons today that we've read can help shed some light on this.

The first one is the Genesis text. For weeks now we've heard the stories of Abraham and Sarah, especially related to God establishing a covenant – or a two-way promise – with them. That covenant is this: Abraham and Sarah will be the parents of a great nation, and in this covenant that nation will praise God and the whole world will be blessed through them. The tension of today's story is that Abraham is now gone, and it is not known whether his son Isaac will find a wife that will help him continue the family's covenant. To be honest, we could spend a long time discussing the customs described in this story: nose rings, servants, arranged marriages, dowries... you name it. However, that could all be done without ever discussing how God can be found in this story that doesn't include God as a character. We can see God's covenant with Abraham reflected in the covenant that Isaac and Rebekah begin together in marriage.

In our society, arranged marriages are not very common, but many cultures continue the practice. One common understanding of those who practice arranged marriages is that as the two people continue to be faithful to their shared covenant, that faithfulness toward the other results in love emerging. Today's reading ends with Isaac taking Rebekah, "and she became his wife; and he loved her." As readers of the story, this Rebekah's covenant with Isaac is supposed to remind us of God's covenant with Sarah and Abraham: God is remaining faithful to the covenant, and this faithfulness is resulting in love emerging. Eventually we will see God remain faithful to the covenant through thick and thin – through slavery and exodus, through judges and kings, through prophets and exile, through return and growth of the Jewish people. The story continues on as a love story with the Jewish people, and it continues as the new covenant established through Jesus Christ. The love of this story is seen primarily in God's continued faithfulness to the people of God. God calling us "beloved." Be loved. Be love.

When we turn to Matthew's gospel lesson for today, we see this faithfulness of God continuing, though it is a bit obscured. To be honest, Matthew is probably my least favorite of the four gospels. There... I said it. Pastors can have favorites, too. The reason why I give it that ranking is because it frequently uses language that comes across as harsh or judgmental. Matthew is the only

gospel that time and again ends parables and teachings with the phrase “and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” On its own, that sounds like a threat, which isn’t healthy for any functional relationship. To understand such statements, we have to take in a bigger picture of the gospel than what our Sunday readings allow. For instance, today’s reading begins with Jesus decrying, “To what shall I compare this generation?” That can’t be good. He says that John the Baptist was demonized for living an ascetic lifestyle, while Jesus himself is being demonized for supposedly having a libertine lifestyle, based on those he associates with. “Which is it?” he is asking.

You may recall that last week’s gospel was only three verses long, and it was all about welcoming. The last verse included the line, “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones... [will not] lose their reward.” The whole passage uses metaphor. The point is to be generous and to welcome those who are considered lowly. We need to keep that in mind as we turn the page to today’s passage. Matthew is not presenting us with a God who is angry at people and who is looking forward to weeping and gnashing of teeth. Rather, Matthew presents us with a God who is upset that there are people of privilege who shut out other people from an experience with God. To be clear, this concern was not with Judaism as a whole, just with some who were in positions that gave them more privilege than others. They would find reasons to prevent others from accessing a relationship with a faithful and loving God. Others who most needed access to the gifts that are found in a life with God. Others who most needed the comfort of knowing that God names them beloved. In Matthew’s gospel, God is not angry in general. Rather, God is upset when people prefer to create stumbling blocks for others instead of creating an authentic invitation to know God’s faithfulness and love. We don’t need to look hard to find people of God today whose efforts amount to creating hurdles for others to have a relationship with God, rather than using their energy to reach out to those who most need to hear that God calls them beloved.

“You don’t present yourself in an acceptable way.”

“You need to straighten your life out and pull yourself up by your bootstraps.”

“You deserve what you get.”

“You love the wrong people.”

“You disgust me.”

To those who have been on the receiving end of such statements, Jesus says,
“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.”

Our God is faithful to all whom God establishes a covenant. Faithful to the covenant made
with the people of Israel. Faithful to the covenant made with those baptized into the new covenant
with Jesus Christ. God is faithful... not just to the ones who are privileged, not just to the ones who
are able to check all the right boxes. God seeks out people from all walks of life, claims them, and is
faithful to them.

God’s faithfulness reveals the most central part of who we all are:

We are beloved.

Be loved.

Be love.

Amen.