



Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67](#)

[Song of Solomon 2:8-13](#)

[Romans 7:15-25a](#)

[Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

Good morning. It is so good to be back with you all.

Thank you for all you have shared with each other during this month that I have been away on business and vacation. You have shared in leadership, in ministry, in prayer, in care, in deep and heartfelt conversation, in presence in the community. I am grateful for the witness of faith of this church.

My work for the wider church has been intense. More on that at a later date.

Our vacation was good, and deeply refreshing even while a bit exhausting as we drove over 2500 miles to take in the beauty across the inland and pacific northwest. It is good to unplug for a while! Thank you for the time away.

Now, in these days of intense and prolonged high heat, we pray for safety and health for ourselves and for those around us in our communities. And we pray for wisdom and the will to respond as we face more heat ahead.

You'll notice that we are moving through the book of Genesis through this summer. We are hitting key portions of some of the most ancient stories that mark the beginning of the faith in one God.

Abraham. Abraham and Sarah. Three major religions trace their deep roots to this source, to this pair. Abraham and Sarah. As we have heard in recent weeks, Abraham and Sarah did some things that left incredibly painful marks on the people that mattered most to them – even as they sought to follow God's will. And yet, it is just such as these – these very human people – to whom God's promise is given.

I'll have more to say about Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah, later. But, let's begin with something that comes through very clearly in our most ancient biblical stories.

From the beginning, we have been a mess. And from the beginning, we have had messed-up families. And from the beginning, we have formed societies that have been profoundly messed up. Even as we function and carry on and find successes. Even as we celebrate and enjoy family life. Even as we build communities and harness human creativity together in our cultures and societies. We have also been, and continue to be, a mess.

It is into just such a mess that God continues to come, seeking us. Just as Jesus said nearly two thousand years after Abraham to the people gathering around him, so God has been saying and

whispering in the wind and crying out at our city gates and calling through the doors of our households – “Come unto me.” “Take my yoke upon you.”

“Come unto me, all you who are weak and heavy laden, 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.”

God want us – each of us – and is calling to us. In the last weeks, you have heard sermons reflecting on the call to love, no matter what the incredible challenges are in the world around us or in our own lives. You have heard sermons pointing to the complexity of what we call “freedom” and how it is exercised unequally in our world – and how the call to love binds us to God and to a way of life that is ultimately the most freeing thing we can ever experience. That calling to love is our yoke that we take on, each one of us and together. It is the yoke of Christ.

The problem is, we have become bound and shackled by the patterns of our own making – patterns of thought, patterns of perceiving and interpreting, patterns of feeling, patterns of acting and interacting – patterns in the marketplace, in our businesses, in government. We are caught in patterns that blind us from seeing and receiving something new and fresh – or from seeing and receiving something old and familiar that we have forgotten or ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.

Jesus notes with sadness and frustration how the people of his generation in ancient Judea are receiving him. He tells them how they are stuck in their own patterns of judgment – judging John the Baptist as crazy or demon-possessed, and judging Jesus as a glutton and drunkard. In each case, they are dismissing the teachings and hard callings of John and Jesus. In each case, they are discounting the relevance of God’s word that is clearly coming to them about a different way to live. They are trapped in their own judgments of others who differ from themselves – even as those who are different hold up the words of life that can free them and release them from their bonds.

Because, friends, they don’t see themselves as bound. They believe, in the swirl of their patterned thoughts and perceptions and actions, that they are free.

But they are not free.

We are no different. We are the same. We have patterned ourselves and we have been shaped into patterns of thinking and perceiving and acting and interacting – and we don’t even hear all of the ways that we have been bound and shackled. We think this is freedom.

Any of you who have had counseling or therapy know that there is an awakening that happens in our lives, when we begin to see that our experiences in our families left marks on us that created enduring patterns. Even from families where there was abused, children believe – and have to believe in order to survive – that their families were good places. It takes a while for people to come to a recognition of the pains inflicted in families that end up binding their hearts and minds. It takes a while for people to untwist the unhelpful ways of thinking and being that they

learned. And it takes a while longer to recognize that these people who wounded them were human filled with fallibilities but also graces and gifts – and to see that they themselves are human as well, with fallibilities and blindspots as well as gifts of beauty and grace.

So it is for any of us. We are blind to ourselves. And, like the people of Jesus' generation, we can avoid seeing something new about ourselves from the person who is different by "shooting the messenger," pigeon-holing them as different in some ugly way that allows us to distance them from ourselves.

About 40 years ago, a sociologists named Irving Gottman wrote about the power of social forces in shaping our ideas about ourselves. He, like others, thought that our identities – our very sense of Self – develops from all the input and feedback we receive from the world around us. Gottman talked about our lives in families and communities and society as theatrical performances. "All the world's a stage." And he spoke of the players on stage all wearing masks. And, if anyone on stage dared to take off their mask, and started to act and say things differently, everyone else on stage would do everything they could to get that person to put their mask back on.

A particular stream of counseling called family systems therapy took up a similar perspective that revolutionized counseling. Rather than simply seeking to treat and help a single individual in therapy, these counselors worked with whole families, because families had their own patterns that shaped, confined, and drew forth each individual's ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and interacting. To them, the "problem" of the individual got started in a family system of patterns that might hold some deeper, more enduring patterns. There's a principle from engineering, specifically from heating and air conditioning systems, where temperature is regulated to stay within a narrow window of variation. The principle is called homeostasis – the way a system is created and sustained to keep things the same. In families, and in churches and businesses and communities and nations, people enact homeostasis as a force, so that anyone who begins to move differently – for good or for ill, in more healthy or more unhealthy ways – will get a response by others in the system trying to tug that person back into the recognized patterns.

This is the world of worlds, of systems that we live in. They shape, constrain, and direct our thoughts, perceptions and interpretations, feelings, actions and interactions. They shape the very fabric of who we are.

Is it any wonder that Paul in his letter to the Romans describes a feeling of being trapped?

(I want to commend to each of you these wonderful chapters in Romans, chapters 6-8. They have been treasures of Protestant traditions since the Reformation and are loved by Evangelicals, because of how much they show us about our own powerlessness to save and change ourselves, and how great a gift is the loving grace of God through Jesus, and how much we need that grace that truly frees us.)

Paul is in the midst of that part of his letter, showing how trapped we all are, how unfree we truly are. We cannot even change ourselves. Paul says, “I don’t understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” And he goes on to say, “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.” Paul is pointing to the patterns that he has learned and have now become part of him, that twist and constrain and shape his thinking, perceiving, interpreting, feeling, acting, and interacting. We want to follow Christ and do as God leads us to do. We want to love as Christ Jesus loves. But when we get to the question of how, we run into ourselves and our own barriers: “I don’t think I could just approach a person who seems to be in distress.” “It’s not polite to intervene.” “God helps those who help themselves.” “Some people deserve more love than others.” “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “Never show weakness, it sets you up to be hurt.”

These are just some of the scripts that rattle around like chains in our heads, that bind our hearts. So, we cannot imagine God different than this life that is the patterns of scripts and masks that we know and perhaps have come to love – and out of our patterns we invent a God who also has a script and role and mask, who is patterned after our own image.

But God keeps saying, “Come to me.” “Take MY yoke upon you.” Come to me – leave that other stuff behind – let go of the chains that hold you, and take on my much lighter yoke. Come to me – know love, and love freely and without fear.

I wonder how Isaac heard this whisper of the God of heaven, especially after what he experienced when Abraham took him into the countryside and laid him on an altar to be a sacrifice. Even though at the last minute God staid Abraham’s hand. Even if Abraham was acting on what he thought God had asked him to do – and maybe it was what God asked. Think of this experience from Isaac’s perspective. Think of the mark that left on Isaac, and the way that experience reshaped family life as they likely did not speak openly about it afterwards. This boy named Isaac, which means “Laughter”... we never hear of him laughing, and indeed we don’t hear much of him speaking. We hear much more from Abraham his father, and Jacob his younger son. But he is a middle, wounded generation. He seems almost lifeless. Abraham even constrains his movement – he tells his servant not to take Isaac with him to the land where Abraham’s family lived, but to bring a willing bride back from his long travels. Throughout his life, Isaac does not seem to make many choices of his own. And yet, somehow, God’s promise is to come through him.

I wonder, with all that he experienced, if Isaac could hear God’s call to him?

But, friends, God DID come to him – not only in whispers, but through Rebekah. Rebekah is the one who brings new life into this family. Rebekah, who came to the well with her large jar for water on her shoulder, who, when Abraham’s elder servant Eliezer asked her for a drink of

water, said, “Certainly – and let me also get water for your thirsty camels,” and so showed an easy-flowing generosity of spirit. Rebekah, who, after her brother and mother discussed the possibility of an arranged marriage with Eliezer and heard that there would be no celebratory wedding, when they asked her, “Will you go with this man?” said, “I will” – showing such courage and faith and willingness to enter a lifelong adventure. Rebekah, who, upon seeing Isaac wandering around a field, quickly got off her camel and prepared herself to meet him.

And Isaac took her as his wife. And Isaac loved her. This is a rare statement in the Old Testament about a couple. It is very intentionally said here – Isaac loved her. And the love that she brought, and the love that awakened in him, brought him freedom and relief. God’s relief and yoke of love came for Isaac through another person.

So many are caught in the prisons of their lives, the patterns holding and binding them. How do they hear the call of Jesus, “Come to me,” and “Take MY yoke upon you”?

We are an intensely busy family, and we have chosen to get help cleaning the big dean’s house where we live. Our regular house-cleaning crew is wonderful. One of the key leaders of our crew is also a mom – a mom who faces constant distress in her family. Her husband wrestles with PTSD, and that has an impact on his ability to face some intense family challenges. Her daughter is in traps of rampant recurring addiction as she wrestles with a severe mental illness, and her choices have landed her on the streets and in and out of hospitals. This daughter regularly cuts off contact with her parents, until things completely fall apart. This last week, mom told us that she was having a really hard week, because her daughter had disappeared again. A little while into her time at our house, she got a call from her daughter. Her daughter said, “I’m out on a street somewhere, I don’t know where I am. These people who I thought were my friends shaved my head and beat me up, and took all my stuff. I don’t know where I am.” The mom’s heart was breaking, and we held her and talked with her. But I find myself brokenhearted for the daughter, too. How and when does this young woman hear the call of Jesus, “Come to me?”

God will come to her and others like her – through us. It’s through us. Like Rebekah, arriving as we are at the scene, willing to take a bold step to venture forth, responding quickly when we see the one to whom God is calling us, getting ourselves ready for an encounter that might – just might – change the course of our own lives. It’s through us that God whispers and cries out and knocks.

So, friends, three things I ask you to ask yourself:

- What is Christ Jesus calling you to lay aside, so that you can take on his yoke?
- Can you allow Love Divine to unshackle you, and set you free from the patterns that constrain you?
- How will you let yourself be led by the yoke of Christ Jesus, the yoke of love, to others who need Christ’s holy, all-loving embrace through you?