

Message: Confident Faith

John Wesley Fellow and ordained Elder Amy Wagner tells the story of **Faithfulness Brought to Life**¹:

“Amy remembers a man named Jose. Jose was the janitor at a homeless shelter on Chicago’s west side, where she once worked as a chaplain. Amy saw Jose often in the course of her work there, but didn’t speak to him much. His English was broken and slow, and her Spanish was, well, worse than his English. So they mostly just nodded and smiled at one another as they passed in the halls. But as Amy learned more about the history of that place, she learned Jose’s story too.

As a young father Jose got a job on the cleaning staff of a local nursing home. Years went by, and the neighborhood around the home deteriorated, the nursing home eventually closed, and the building sat empty. But Jose, who lived down the street with his family, didn’t want the abandoned building to become a drug hangout. So he maintained it. Impeccably.

Jose mowed the grass and planted flowers in the spring. He painted the worn siding when the old paint began to peel. He washed the windows. He repaired the sagging gutters. He kept the building looking beautiful. And he did it for *six years*. Six years of quietly taking care of an abandoned building. Six years of watching out for the neighborhood kids, making sure they had a safe, well-maintained lawn on which to play in an increasingly dangerous neighborhood.

Six years later, the board of directors of a homeless shelter found this building on Chicago’s west side, and it became their new home. Jose was hired as their caretaker.

For Amy, whenever she thinks of what it means to be faithful to a task, to a community, to a place, she sees Jose’s face. He brought *faithfulness* to life.

We human beings are created in God’s image with the power of words – creative words – that bring to life the abstract. We have the power, through our lives, to bring love, peace, joy, and hope to life. We have the

¹ <http://www.catalystresources.org/words-come-to-life/#sthash.1lD1dnXS.dpuf>

power, by the grace of God, to volunteer our own flesh to bring the glory of God into our world.”

Consider, as we begin another year together: What words do you allow to take shape in your life? Are they words that give life to others, that illuminate the character of God? And, if you are not a person of words, what do you voluntarily do to bring the glory of God into the world? How do we live a life of confident faith?

We are more encouraged and committed to worship, prayer and voluntary charity when we take risks to grow in our knowledge and faith of God. That’s the lesson Jose teaches us. And it’s the lesson we have in the Scripture for today from Genesis 24. This Scripture is a wonderful example of divine matchmaking, the OT version of eHarmony or Elohim harmony, if you’ll forgive the conjunction. God matched Isaac and Rebekah and blessed their marriage. But there’s much more to the lesson. Genesis 24 shows us how God works in the normal, everyday aspects of a family’s life. In this case, how a father and a trusted servant relied on God to provide for a beloved son and how a young woman trusted God and was led to a new life beyond her wildest dreams.

God is the primary actor in this story. Genesis 24:1 tells us, “*Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.*” God blessed Abraham for more than 100 years, creating a people of faith who would follow and worship him. God shows his faithfulness to us through Abraham’s life.

Abraham is 140 years old at this time. Sarah died four years earlier, leaving Abraham and Isaac alone. Isaac was now 40 years old (see Gen. 25:20) and he was grieving the death of his mother. God gave Abraham many tasks to do in his lifetime, but there was one more key task: to arrange a marriage for Isaac. If Isaac did not have a wife, there was no way for God’s promise to Abraham to be fulfilled, for his descendents to be numbered like the stars (Gen. 15).

Abraham calls on his oldest, most trusted advisor, his servant Eliezer. We know the servant was most likely Eliezer from Gen. 15:2. Eliezer is the one who would have inherited all of Abraham’s lands and wealth if

he had died without a son. Not only does it put a different spin on the respectability and role of a servant in ancient Jewish culture, it shows the trust Abraham had in Eliezer. He gave Eliezer the great responsibility of finding a wife for his only son, Isaac.

Abraham took a risk confidently, in full assurance God’s will would provide for Isaac as he already had at Isaac’s miraculous birth and his salvation on Mt. Moriah. We would probably worry about all sorts of worldly things. For example, did Eliezer have any ill will toward Isaac? Would he make a good or bad choice? Would Eliezer take the gifts, consider them as his due and run? What about bandits on the long trip? Would he be able to find a woman willing to make such a long trip to marry a man she didn’t know? Even Eliezer was worried about that; Abraham agreed to let him out of his oath if no one would come.

Abraham took another risk in searching for a suitable partner for Isaac. He sent Eliezer back to Haran, to the family home to look for a suitable bride. Rather than looking for a woman in Canaan, where they lived, Abraham chose to send his most trusted man more than 300 miles away. Why? Historically, some have sought to justify this action on some ethnic basis, but that is a false reading of the text. Abraham was concerned about the declining moral conditions of Canaan. He lived in the land of the Hittites and their moral practices were poor. They did not worship the Almighty God. So Abraham sent his agent to the only place where he knew the people were faithful to God in thought, word and deed. He sent Eliezer back home to family.

Abraham was led by God’s Spirit in this action. When I meet with couples in pre-marital counseling, we talk about compatibility in our first session. There are three types of compatibility: personal, life purpose and spiritual. Personal compatibility deals with our personalities – our likes and dislikes, all of those “personal ad” kinds of things. That’s a “nice to have” for marriage. Life purpose compatibility has to do with the purpose and meaning of life. In other words, does the couple have the same life goals, values and drivers? Are they moving in the same direction in life? This is a “need to have” for marriage. The most important compatibility is spiritual compatibility. This is a “must have” for a marriage. If a couple does not have the same basis for their

spiritual life, they will be constantly pulled in different directions at the most fundamental level of their being. If one person believes in Jesus Christ and the other does not, there is a constant tension as only half of the relationship is founded on a love that cannot fail – Christ’s, while the other half is founded on worldly love, which always fails. This is a recipe for failure, conflict and often divorce. I don’t mean to make anyone here feel bad, but this is the most common source of marital tension in the world today.

By sending Eliezer to Haran, Abraham was seeking a spiritually compatible wife for Isaac. This was important for Isaac believed in God and, if Abraham’s descendents were to come from Isaac, they would need spiritual guidance from both father and mother, not just their father. This is a good lesson for us today, though it’s unpopular in the world. Statistics show that young women and men today are more willing to marry outside of the Christian faith than any other factor considered. This makes the mission of the church to the world even more important. We must speak to today’s youth and help them to understand the basis for spirituality is God in Christ Jesus by the grace of God. The source of our faith is Jesus and the church is the body of Christ on Earth, equipped to do God’s work.

I believe that’s the key reason Abraham sent Eliezer, the person he trusted more than anyone else. Not only was Eliezer sworn to the task, Abraham knew Eliezer was a true believer. Eliezer’s speech and actions demonstrate his faith and his conviction. He is a great example of a man of God. He worships God and prays before, during and after every step of his journey. He was dedicated to his duty, even refusing to eat with Laban and his family, before he told them why he was there. That was unusual, because meals were a key part of guest hospitality – once a meal was offered, the guest had rights to stay. By refusing to eat, Eliezer was indicating he was willing to move on if the arrangement wasn’t suitable, no matter how late the hour. Following God in his service to Abraham was his priority and focus. He was watchful and patient, willing to wait on God and he showed it in all he did.

The most important person in this narrative is Rebekah. She is a marvelous example of a woman of God, a person we should all emulate.

She makes a sudden entrance into the narrative, interrupting Eliezer’s prayer to God, when he was asking God to give him a specific sign. The sign was important as it illustrated the qualities important in a mate for marriage: first, a heart for hospitality and service to others; second, an eagerness and willingness to take initiative; third, a readiness not only to offer but to give more than the expected minimum; finally, someone who is hardworking, not lazy. These are the primary qualities of a mate in ancient Israel. We might update a bit today, but there is a truth that resonates here. Rebekah clearly demonstrated all of these qualities.

Not only was she polite and respectful when she gave water to Eliezer, but she drew water for all ten of the camels in the caravan! This is a lot of work, because it requires lowering and raising a bucket into the well several times for each camel. The best modern day equivalent I can think of is a woman who would pump gas for a fleet of cars, checking the oil and tire pressure, and cleaning the windows of each one. What’s even more amazing is that she did it without being asked! God’s sign couldn’t have been more clear than if a glowing hand had appeared and pointed at her. Yet, we have to notice Eliezer didn’t say anything, he just watched until she was done. That’s a good lesson when we’re looking for a sign from God. If we aren’t patient and watchful, what we say and do can influence others. The perception that something is true isn’t the same as the reality of truth. Rebekah was the real deal.

Rebekah had a good relationship with her family. She felt comfortable offering hospitality to Eliezer and his men and ran to tell her Mom about them. Her brother Laban trusted her, met them and extended that offer of hospitality on behalf of the family. Rebekah and her family did believe in God and, when they heard Eliezer’s mission, recognized God’s hand at work. Rebekah was confident and loved by her family. They trusted her and her ability to make decisions. That’s why they asked her to decide whether to stay with them for ten more days or to leave immediately with Eliezer and return to Canaan. Rebekah had a voice in her family, a voice that was heard and respected. She chose and they didn’t try to argue or hinder her because they knew she trusted God and because they had confidence in God.

The decision could not have been an easy one. Rebekah chose to leave her family and friends, the only people she knew, to travel more than 300 miles on a camel to meet and marry a man she had never met and did not know. The distance involved meant that she might never see her family again. This is a decision that goes way beyond symbolic gifts, gold and legal arrangements or obligations to honor family. Rebekah’s decision was made freely and willingly. God worked in her heart and, because she confidently trusted God with all she had, she found love with Isaac. Through the faith of Abraham, Eliezer and Rebekah, Isaac too was encouraged and he finally found comfort after the loss of his mother. The loss of one love was overshadowed by the gain of a love made in heaven by God. The faith, hope and love of Isaac and Rebekah gives us encouragement.

I pray that you are encouraged and committed to worship, prayer and voluntary charity taking risks to grow in your knowledge and faith of God.

Genesis 24: 34–38, 42–49, 58–67 (NRSV)

So he said, “I am Abraham’s servant. The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys. And Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master when she was old; and he has given him all that he has. My master made me swear, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father’s house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.’

“I came today to the spring, and said, ‘O LORD, the God of my master Abraham, if now you will only make successful the way I am going! I am standing here by the spring of water; let the young woman who comes out to draw, to whom I shall say, ‘Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,’ and who will say to me, ‘Drink, and I will draw for your camels also’ - let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master’s son.’

“Before I had finished speaking in my heart, there was Rebekah coming out with her water jar on her shoulder; and she went down to the spring, and drew. I said to her, ‘Please let me drink.’ She quickly let down her jar from her shoulder, and said, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels.’ So I drank, and she also watered the camels. Then I asked her, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ She said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor’s son, whom Milcah bore to him.’ So I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her arms. Then I bowed my head and worshiped the LORD, and blessed the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me by the right way to obtain the daughter of my master’s kinsman for his son. Now then, if you will deal loyally and truly with my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so that I may turn either to the right hand or to the left.”

And they called Rebekah, and said to her, “Will you go with this man?” She said, “I will.” So they sent away their sister Rebekah and her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and his men. And they blessed Rebekah and said to her, “May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.”

Then Rebekah and her maids rose up, mounted the camels, and followed the man; thus the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.

Now Isaac had come from Beer-lahai-roi, and was settled in the Negeb. Isaac went out in the evening to walk in the field; and looking up, he saw camels coming. And Rebekah looked up, and when she saw Isaac, she slipped quickly from the camel, and said to the servant, “Who is the man over there, walking in the field to meet us?” The servant said, “It is my master.” So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.

Romans 7:15–25a (NRSV)

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.