

**A Time to Laugh; a Time to Cry
And Grace to Know the Difference**

Genesis 24: 1-33a, 50-59
Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

When my sister and I were small children, our parents would give us 5 cents to buy candy,
in those days at 1 cent a piece.

The family story is that I would buy three pieces and put 2 cents into my piggy bank.
My sister would purchase five pieces and ask to borrow my savings for more.

That's not the end of the story.

I recall an early conversation

in which I suggested we should save the best piece for last.

Her retort was that we should eat the best one first, the second best next, and so on.

That way, she insisted, we would always be eating the best that we had.

These two styles have characterized our two lives ever since.

While we look a great deal alike, we have very different modes of operation.

Some of you will identify with one of us and some of you with the other.

At the moment, I don't wish to judge between the two.

What I want to do instead is to insist that all of our everyday life

– our actions, our desires, our emotions, our thoughts, our values –
are linked to who we are deep down inside ourselves.

This we see in the delightful story of Rebekah,

a girl so impulsive, so energetic, so generous, so gracious, so headstrong –
characteristics that were going to define her

as Genesis unfolds the rest of its larger story.

Rebekah is amazingly forward for her time and place in history.

Like a modern teen-ager, she comes with her water jar, full of exuberance,
generously offering water not only for the stranger

but for his ten camels as well! Camels drink a lot of water.

And with only a bit of a hint from Abraham's servant,

she invites the whole party – camels and all – to stay at her father's house.

The hospitality was welcomed, but the youthful enthusiasm of this girl
must have been a sore affront to this old faithful servant.

In any event, once the marriage had been arranged,

he wanted to be on his way back to home in Canaan.

Rebekah's family argued for a few more days to be with the girl,

but she firmly insisted with shocking enthusiasm
that she was ready to go.

Now it was this same Rebekah who, using the same skills and energy,
later encouraged her favourite son to trick his father
into giving him the inheritance that rightly belonged to his brother.

Why is this story in the Bible?

Most of Genesis is about confrontation:

struggle among people, struggle with God.

Its thesis is that God, the unknowable, moves over the chaos
with inscrutable purpose to create man and woman

and to call them into relationship with the divine.

In the middle of this grand epic comes the simple story of Rebekah

as a reminder that this larger-than-life narrative is about *real* people.

The ancient story contains details that seem strange, of course.

No one of us would think of sending a servant to find a bride for a son,
without so much as consulting the son.

Yet in its central point the story is about characters so much like us.

Jesus talked about real people as well.

“We played the flute for you and you did not dance.

We wailed and you did not mourn.”

We sang and you didn’t hum along; we cried and you weren’t even sad.”

John lived in the dessert and ate what you and I would not eat.

He may have been crazy, but he sure could preach.

Jesus ate and drank and had a good time with about everybody.

He may have been a glutton, but he sure had power.

There is a time for weeping and a time for joy, Jesus seems to be saying.

We had a funeral on Thursday and a wedding on Friday.

Each was an occasion for engaging our whole being.

Cry for the suffering and have joy for those who celebrate,

but do either with beauty and perhaps even with whimsy and certainly with grace.

Christianity is both fun *and* the Ten Commandments,

both relaxation *as well as* discipline.

Each is integral to our task.

To truly weep, to truly dance, one needs some substance, some inner strength.

It’s sometimes called character,

built with firmness of purpose and understanding of life:

understanding of big things, but also of little things from which the big are made.

That means information but also thoughtful consideration

and it means expressive response to what we know.

And where do we get this wisdom, this expressiveness, this inner strength?

“Come unto me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” says Jesus.

Come unto me, all you who are exhausted, and *lighten up*.

John Bunyan in **Pilgrim’s Progress** tells the story of Christian who sets out on a quest that ultimately leads to the cross.

As he goes along, the burden on his back becomes heavier and heavier.
But finally, once he faces Christ on the cross,
the heavy burden simply rolls away of its own accord.

“Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my burden is light.”

Have you ever seen a yoke?

The father of a friend of mine in high school had one.
It was a substantial piece of oak,
that fit across the necks of a pair of oxen with means to hold it in place
so that each ox could pull the weight with its strong neck and shoulders.
In the Greek, I am told, the word can mean “well fitting.”
The yoke maker roughs out the wood and then custom fits it for each ox,
in order not to chafe the neck and shoulders of the animal.

“Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my burden is light.”

OK, there is a paradox here.

But Jesus insists that his commands are not a burden but a joy,
not a set of rules but a thankful response,
because God’s tasks for us have been carefully fitted
to each of our needs and our abilities.

It is this yoke then that puts us in Christ’s service
and yet makes us comfortable with the task.

It is this yoke by which we have depth of character,
– moral and cerebral substance –

that allows us to weep, to dance, to live fully engaged with life.
Shallow people don’t make good Christians;
they don’t even make interesting folk.

Let us pray.

With appreciation to William Barclay, **The Gospel of Matthew**, vol. 2 (revised edition)
Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, pp. 9-18.