

## Sermon for Sunday, July 30, 2023

The tables are turned on our friend Jacob. The trickster was on the run the last time we talked: his brother was out for blood, because Jacob had tricked him out of his birthright and his father's blessing. His mother had suggested that he go to Haran, where her brother Laban lived. He would be safe and he would also find a proper wife, his mother thought, rather than "one of these Canaanite women." And if the thrust of the story we've been listening to in these Genesis tales is that everything depends on each generation having children and growing the number of descendants of the proto-patriarch Abraham, you know what the next step would be in Jacob's story. He needed a bride.

Now when he got to Haran, he spotted Laban's daughter Rachel at the well, a usual spot for young men to see young women, since the women would go and get water for cooking, for providing refreshment for humans and animals...that's just what Jacob's mother Rebekah was doing when Abraham's servant found her. So no surprise here that when Jacob saw the woman he would fall in love with, she was at a well. Lovely, right? The parallel was like an ancient "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," because it wasn't about meeting cute, it was about meeting the right way.

Here's an interesting thing: Jacob didn't go immediately to his uncle and say "I want to marry your daughter Rachel." Instead he described their family connection and Laban affirmed that they were from the same tribe. Jacob offered to help out with Laban's family enterprise: there were large herds of sheep and such that needed management. After a month, Laban said "I really should pay you something for the work you're doing. Tell me what you want."

Ah, the key question! We know what Jacob wanted. He wanted Rachel. We don't know if there had been any courting during that month, but Jacob had fallen hard for Rachel, and so he said "I'll work for you for seven years if you'll let me marry your daughter Rachel." Jacob was well aware that there was an older daughter, Leah, but that wasn't part of the deal here. Laban said that after seven years' labor, Jacob could marry Rachel. And Jacob was happy to do it – it didn't seem excessive to him to do this for the woman he had fallen in love with. And so, seven years after he arrived at Haran, the wedding banquet took place.

Cue the DJ and the caterer and the wine merchant and so on. But that night, when Jacob went to be with his new bride, there was a surprise.

Maybe he had consumed too much of the wine at the banquet, because when he woke up the next morning, who was alongside him in the tent? Not Rachel, but her older sister, Leah.

Not surprisingly, he complained to his father-in-law, who said, "tough luck, my boy. The rule is that the younger woman doesn't get married before the older one is. Leah is now yours, but I'll throw Rachel in as part of the deal if you do the right thing and spend this week – this formal celebratory week – with Leah." And oh by the way you've got to give me another seven years of labor if you want Rachel, too." What a guy!

Why he didn't say anything about the rule about older sisters getting married first to Jacob when the original deal was struck is a mystery. Perhaps Laban thought he'd find another

suitor for Leah during those seven years of Jacob's labor, but there was none to be found – that would be the kindest possibility. In any case, the trickster got tricked, a strange irony indeed.

And in all of this I feel for these two sisters, mere pawns in Laban's plan. The description of the two sisters is telling: Leah is described as having eyes using Hebrew words that are extraordinarily difficult to translate but are most accurately described as "delicate" or "working poorly", not "lovely" ... and Rachel is described as beautiful.

We are set up for what is inevitable: these two sisters wanted and needed to be married, in that time and culture, and they had no say in how their father would make this happen, and they would be pitted against each other. Like Sarah and Hagar. Similar to the tension between Jacob and Esau. Oh, the humanity!

And by the way, for a variety of reasons that happen later, each of these women have a female servant (Bilhah and Zilpah), and each of them bear Jacob children, because...wait for it...Rachel seemed to be unable to have children. Of course that would be the case. And in all this discussion of Jacob getting a fair wage, nobody seems to care that Bilhah and Zilpah are forced to bear children for their master and mistresses without a care for their compensation.

I note that despite the fact that there is a prohibition elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible – in Leviticus, to be exact – a prohibition against a man marrying two sisters as Jacob has done, this instance of polygamy is just sort of let slide. Yes, Leviticus was written later, and perhaps the prohibition is just because of the problems that arose when Jacob did it. Still, it makes my head hurt.

In this story, Jacob learns the pain of being the victim of such a trick, as he had imposed the same sort of deceit on his brother Esau. He not only doesn't get the woman he wants first, the two sisters become engaged in some serious sibling competition. It was heartbreakingly messy, but at the end of it all, Jacob has fathered thirteen children from these four women, one of whom (a son of Rachel) was Joseph. Yes, that Joseph, the multicolored coat guy, Jacob's favorite, who ended up in Egypt working for the Pharaoh because of his brothers' jealousy of their father's favor of Jacob. Rachel learns the pain of being loved but unable to bear children. Leah learns that her fertility doesn't make her more attractive to her husband. Bilhah and Zilpah learn what they already knew: life is terribly unfair, and they have no control over anything, not even their bodies or their offspring.

And yet, if the promise that God had made to these very human and very dysfunctional family members was that they would have more descendants than the dust of the earth, the stars in the sky, the sand on the beach, God delivered. And God delivered in spite of the troubles of these people, their vanity, their deceptions, their arguments, their rivalries. Patterns of bad behavior abound in these stories – it seems one generation doesn't learn from the experiences of those that preceded it.

There is a path, even in these stories, of God helping, trying to get people back on track, whether it's a dream of God's favor, whether it is an abundance of children as per God's promise. But it is not necessarily a path that comports with the human emotions these people feel: attraction, jealousy, despair, anger, hatred, and even – dare I say it? – love?

Because, as my friend the great Old Testament scholar Wil Gafney writes: “Love is not enough. Even if Jacob’s love for Rachel is not based on her appearance or the fact that he was limited in his choice to Rachel and her (in some way undesirable) sister Leah, his love does not translate into a happy, healthy family.

In modernity, some people elevate romantic and sexual love as the highest expressions of love. Neither form of love brings enduring happiness to Jacob who loves Rachel or to Rachel or to Leah who compete to sleep with Jacob and bear his children in the aftermath of the text. “

But there is a greater love, one that has a much longer arc, one that makes promises that are kept: the love of Creator God. God delivers to these messy people. God does not stand in the way of their own free will to make choices that are not always based in love, but God keeps those promises.

And despite their struggles and the repeated patterns of bad behavior across the generations, something happens to them and through them, so that they can be better. They can live into the vision of God’s creation, perhaps only dimly at times, but they can.

And so can we. Our narrow view of love may not be enough. But if we can see our world as God does, if we can see the possibilities as God does, even dimly, perhaps we begin to understand another kind of love: the love of a world transformed, the comfort of kept promises, the security of the abundance we have been given. May we see, may we feel, may we act, to fulfill that which God has promised all of us. All of us. Not just you who are sitting here today, but all of us.

And so we pray: Lord give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts that are open to your will in our lives, and may we then go and do what you will. Amen.