



The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, July 26th, 2020

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Sermon Transcript

Genesis 29:15-28

Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country - giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

On Justice

An old story. A classic car lover was perusing the classifieds and saw an ad that seemed impossible to believe. A 1966 candy-apple red Corvette, a dream car, and offered for \$100. What? \$100...for a classic? No way, José. Was it a wreck? Or maybe the price was a misprint. Still, he had to find out, so he called. A woman answered the phone and assured him that the car was in excellent shape and that there was no mistake about the price. He dashed over.

To his delight the car proved to be everything the woman reported it to be. Gorgeous! Of course he told her that he would take it. \$100. But his conscience gnawed at him as he wrote the check. "Ma'am, I have to tell you that this car is worth far more than \$100. You have every right to get a much higher price."

"Oh, I know that," she replied, "but you see my husband left me and ran off with his floozy secretary. He said he didn't want anything from our marriage - I could keep everything but the Corvette. He wanted me to sell that and send him the money. Which is precisely what I am doing. \$100."

Ah, justice. In a way, that is probably what came to the minds of those ancients who listened to the story of Jacob.

Jacob was the twin son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of old Abraham and Sarah" - Abraham, the one with whom God had made a covenant, the one whose descendants God had promised to make a great nation. Surely, Jacob must have heard the stories of Abraham. Surely, he must have heard about his family's heritage.

But if he did, it doesn't seem to have made much difference in his life. The Bible tells us that Jacob lived a ruthless and selfish life, depending only on himself, looking out only for himself, and either manipulating, or exploiting, everyone around him to get what he wanted. In fact, that lifestyle had gotten him into trouble. He had made an enemy of his brother Esau and taken such advantage of his father that he was told to leave home and go stay with his uncle in Haran – to get him out of his father's hair. If you are not familiar with the story of Jacob read chapters 25 to 36 of Genesis – a fascinating story.

It's interesting, isn't it? God called Abram to leave his home in Haran to go out and found a new people, but now Jacob, his grandson who carries the destiny of God's promise to Abram, leaves the family home and flees back to Haran. But there is a purpose to God's plan. Jacob will find a wife there who will be of his own people.

The episode from Jacob's life we heard this morning does not seem to be a particularly spiritual one. These verses are not the stuff of inspirational posters, and these scenes do not become pictures on the walls of our Sunday school classrooms. These are not the profound moments of encounter with God. In fact, God is not mentioned at all in this story. His hand is not obvious in the events that unfold, and his influence is certainly not apparent in the behavior of these people.

This story does not seem like natural Sunday morning material. It does, however, seem like Monday morning material — and Tuesday afternoon — and Friday night. This story is the stuff of real day-to-day life. We see here the stuff of work and wages, of love and marriage, of celebrations and conflicts. While we may not immediately recognize God's role in the story, we surely recognize everything else about it..

One of the most amazing things about the Hebrew Scriptures, is its willingness to describe the ancestors of Israel in all their less than flattering human actions and traits. The Jews have had the courage and wisdom not to hide our human nature, but to reveal it in all its forms, from the most splendid to the vilest. Scripture hangs the family clothing out on a line for all to see.

Here in this passage we read about an employment deal worked out between Jacob and his uncle Laban. The occasion for this deal is the old story line of "boy meets girl and falls in love." Jacob had met Rachel, Laban's daughter, and it was love at first sight. He was utterly bowled over and swept off his feet by Rachel and as soon as he saw the opportunity, he asked permission to marry her.

The conversation, as is recorded for us in our scripture reading, was initiated by Laban. "Because you are my kinsman," he said to Jacob, "should you therefore serve me for nothing?" Tell me what your wages should be.

Jacob is very clear about the salary package for which he wants to negotiate. "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter, Rachel."

That's a lot of love. But Jacob was so taken with Rachel that he was willing to devote seven years of his life to laboring, knowing that all he would have to show for it in the end was a wife. No savings. No belongings. No flocks, no herds, no children. Not even seven years of enjoying being married. But that's what Jacob was willing to do; he set the terms.

Laban, with another slick imitation of generosity, replied, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man."

Always the consummate bargainer, Laban raises the specter of another customer waiting in the wings. He uses the term "give" rather loosely, considering the steep price he is accepting from his nephew for his daughter. But the Bible says that Jacob's seven years of labor "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for [Rachel]."

At the end of the 7 years, there was a great wedding feast and Jacob thought he had married Rachel but in the morning he discovered that he had spent his wedding night with a different bride - Leah, Rachel's older sister. How Jacob did not know he had married Leah and how he did not know he had spent the night with Leah is not told. Maybe there was too much make-up and wedding gown, maybe too much drinking, maybe exhaustion from greeting too many guests. It seems unbelievable, but however it happened, it happened. When Jacob discovered the trickery, he immediately charged Laban and demanded, "What is this you have done to me?" Laban then explains to Jacob that Leah had the right to be married first because she was the eldest daughter. That was the tradition in their culture.

Now it is Jacob's turn to suffer the humiliation and pain of being deceived and tricked. But all is not lost for him. Laban proposes that if Jacob will work for him another seven years, he may marry Rachel in seven days when his honeymoon with Leah is finished. And so Jacob agrees, and in seven days he marries Rachel, the love of his life. But all this is a sordid affair. Laban uses and abuses Jacob to achieve his own ends. And while it may be said that Jacob gets only what he gave in his earlier life, it is still another sad story of deception in which people are used and hurt. Of particular note is the treatment of Leah and Rachel, who seem to be played as mere objects in Laban's hand even though they are his daughters. What

is absent is a sense of decency and honesty. In the end, Laban managed to get an extra seven years of labor out of Jacob,

Jacob met his match in Laban having been repeatedly bested by this senior con artist, Laban but with good effect. When Jacob left Laban's house, he did not revert to his old ways. He was honest with God about who he was. He was genuine and humble with brother Esau in their reunion and looked to reuniting with his father Isaac..

God was working in Jacob's life – believe it or not and God is still at work in our lives and in our world, too -- even when we often live as if God doesn't exist. God pushes into our lives in all sorts of life experiences

In spite of the historical oddities in this story--such as the cultural practice of having multiple wives--the story of Jacob and Rachel is one of history's great love stories. It is a story of commitment and principle. It is a reminder to us that great love can exist--even in our modern world.

And if some of you feel a great empathy for Leah, the homelier, "other wife." It might cheer you to know that, somewhere along the way, after Rachel's death Jacob and Leah must have bonded as well. For when Jacob dies as an old man, he is buried not beside Rachel, but beside Leah.

Love and marriage. Principle and character. These are people we can all relate to. And in the shadows is a loving God who is working out His plan for creation. After his marriage to Leah and Rachel, Jacob is soon blessed with twelve children who become the figureheads for the twelve tribes of Israel. In a real sense, it is the birth of a nation! Leah, in fact, gives birth to six of these children, while Rachel gives birth to only two! And in case you are questioning my math, the girls' two maidservants given to them by Laban, gave birth to the other four. So Laban's deception becomes a blessing in disguise.

God is indeed present with Jacob, making him wealthy in children so that the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled through him, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

It takes courage and determination to press on forward in the face of misfortune but knowing that God goes with you will make you victorious in the end and in

time those with eyes of faith will surely say, "God was with me all the way. It was not always obvious, but I see that now."

We all go through trials and tribulations in life, sometimes by the hands of others and sometimes by our own hands. But blessed are those who learn from their mistakes. And blessed are those who have the eyes to see and the ears to hear the presence of God in their lives. For God salvages our lives and makes something good out of them.

And perhaps that is the ultimate truth in this tragicomic story: as the aphorism puts it, we cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, but God can. God can work with lovable charlatans like Jacob and do something good; God can work with scoundrels like Laban and do something good; God can work with beautiful people like Rachel and do something good; God can work with the not-so-beautiful people like Leah and do something good. And God can work with people like you and me and likewise do something good. Thanks be to God. Amen.