

JACOB SERIES, Genesis 29, Jacob and Laban, 2017

How do romantic relationships begin? In movies, in books, in real life? My Dad met my Mom at a dance at the University of Minnesota. She went with two of her friends, and he asked both of them to dance before he asked her. But it took. They had a long and happy marriage until her death. How did you meet your spouse or significant other? In books, fairy tales, and movies we know the traditional, classic formula: boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy and girl reunite and live happily ever after. And often the initial meeting may happen in some providential way, where the eyes of the boy and girl just happen to meet, across a crowded room....perhaps at a dance, a party, in a bar. They are drawn together, and after overcoming various dramatic obstacles, they do that happily ever after thing. Of course, that's in movies and stories. Most of us recognize that happily ever after is a little unrealistic. Even in essentially happy and long lasting marriages, like my parents, there will be times of conflict, turmoil, and struggle. And plenty of marriages are neither essentially happy nor long lasting, in spite of what seemed a promising start. So, a word of warning; today, we're going to be looking at a Biblical story of marriage, here in this lovely and perhaps romantic setting of our Garden, but don't get your hopes up; I wish it were otherwise, but this is a real life story, not a fairy tale.

This morning, we continue to follow the life story of Jacob, eventually called Israel, one of the patriarchs of *our* faith, as well as of Judaism and Islam. To date, his life has been a whirlwind of deceit and drama. Recall how he is the unfortunate second born of male twins, and he connives with his mother to steal the birthright and blessing that rightfully belonged to the first born twin, Esau. He does so, in part, by tricking his elderly, blind father, Isaac, into believing that he *is* Esau, when the time for blessing distribution occurs. He then has to run away to avoid Esau's wrath, and his ever helpful mother suggests he go to stay with her brother,

Laban, back in the old country, in the area of Haran, which is now Turkey, the area from which their clan originally came. On the way, Jacob has an amazing dream of a ladder reaching to the heavens, and God blesses him and promises him that he will be the father of a great nation. The giving of this dream has nothing to do with Jacob's goodness or faithfulness, since he has none; it has everything to do with God's goodness and faithfulness. We had that lesson last week.

When we catch up with Jacob today, he has reached Haran, and his Uncle Laban and we have a story of not one marriage, but two; but we missed an important scene just *prior* to where our text picks up: that initial romantic encounter.

If in our day, people meet online or in bars or at dances, several thousand years ago, a well was not a bad place for a guy to pick up a gal. Collecting water from the well was generally women's work, and so a man who strayed there was likely to encounter any number of women, some of whom might be young and available. Jacob's father, Isaac, met his mother, Rebekkah, at a well. Several centuries later, Moses will meet his wife, Zipporah, at a well. And prior to this text, Jacob arrives at Haran, goes to the well to get a drink, and there he sees Rachel, the younger of Uncle Laban's two daughters; his cousin, in fact. Their eyes meet, the music swells, and that romantic spark is struck. At least on Jacob's side; we hear nothing from Rachel's perspective. Therefore, when Laban agrees that Jacob may stay and work for him and offers him some kind of payment in return, Jacob replies that in exchange for working for Laban 7 years, he would like to marry Rachel. Our text explains why: "Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel." Unfortunately, the Hebrew word describing Leah's eyes is very difficult to translate....the more likely translation is "Leah's eyes were *weak*, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful." Whatever weak might have meant....was she cross-eyed perhaps? The fact that Leah, even though the older daughter will remain unmarried for the next 7 years and

then her father seems to believe that only trickery will accomplish getting her married off, *does* suggest that Leah was in some way not very attractive. While Rachel, as sometimes happens amongst siblings, was beautiful. Already, this story, which starts out at the well sounding like a romantic comedy, is rapidly heading downward, isn't it? We realize that there are some difficult sibling dynamics here, between a plain, older sister and a beautiful, younger sister. And the story unfolds with magnificent irony, because Jacob had sibling issues also, with an older sibling twin; and Jacob accomplishes his trickery through assuming his twin's identity. Karma, in Hinduism and Buddhism means that our actions have ethical results that will return to us. But in common parlance, it means: you get back what you've been giving out. Jacob is about to get bitten in the butt by karma, to get back what he's been giving out. He has met his match in his Uncle Laban, and why not? Laban and Rebekkah, Jacob's mother, are siblings, and Rebekkah has shown herself a worthy schemer already. Given the nature of his mother and his uncle, Jacob's deceitful and ambitious ways are merely proof that the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree.

So, Jacob works his 7 years, which seem like no time at all, given his love for Rachel, our text tells us. Scripture is not essentially sentimental or romantic in nature, and for us to be given these kind of details is indeed rare. The time comes for the couple to come together, and crafty Laban throws a feast, at which we can only assume that wine ran freely. Then Laban sends older daughter *Leah* into Jacob, rather than lovely, younger Rachel. Jacob has relations with Leah, and then realizes, come morning---oops! Wrong daughter! What the heck? Again, we can only assume that Jacob did himself pretty well with the wine at the preceding wedding feast. But, he has been fooled by someone assuming a sibling's false identity, just as he fooled his father by assuming his twin sibling's identity. Get it? Now what? When confronted, Laban explains that he could hardly marry off his younger daughter before the older, and Jacob is certainly getting

his own back here, isn't he? Here, as throughout Scripture, we see that *God does irony*. But, Laban suggests Jacob remain with Leah for a week, and then he may also get Rachel, if he will work another 7 years. Which is exactly what happens.

You know all those folks who like to carry on about how we need to return our families to Biblical values? They haven't read these stories, have they? In fact, they haven't read much of the Bible, period. Because what values are we seeing here? Notice who never says a word throughout this text? Either of the sisters. They are, literally, without voice. And they are, in reality, without voice. They are chattel, to be given or withheld at the whim of their father and the male who desires them. They have no say. We have no idea if Rachel returned Jacob's affection. We have no idea how Leah felt about all of this, although we might certainly imagine her humiliation at having to be given through trickery, because her appearance was somehow so undesirable. And appearance is everything! Notice that Rachel is praised for being graceful and beautiful---*not* for being smart, faithful, hard working, or anything at all to do with character. It's all about appearance, rather than character. And it's all about fertility, because the purpose of marriage was to provide sons and descendants for the man, and if a woman was unable to bear children, she was of no account.

Our text ends here, but more disturbing dynamics follow this text. Rachel is the loved wife, but Leah is the fertile wife. In fact, the Scripture suggests that God, seeing Leah's despair at being unloved, blesses her fertility, while withholding it from Rachel. So, Leah has 4 sons. Rachel, having no children, gives her maid servant, Bilhah, to Jacob, and Bilhah bears two sons to Jacob. If women were chattel and without voice, the *maidservant* of a woman was the *absolute* bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. We have no idea if Bilhah wanted to bear Jacob any children; we don't know if she was a willing participant or if she was raped, for all

intents and purposes. We have no clue, and she had no recourse. Leah, seeing that Rachel, through Bilhah is starting to catch up and having ceased to bear any more children herself, gives *her* maid, Zilpah, to Jacob, and Zilpah bears two more sons to Jacob. Again, we have no idea how this seemed to Zilpah and it didn't matter at all at that time. The son count is now at 8, if you're wondering, and the women spending time with Jacob is at 4. Leah again conceives and bears two more sons, making 10. And finally, Rachel bears a son—the famed Joseph—destined, of course, to be the favorite, because he was born of Rachel, the attractive and beloved wife. A 12th son, Benjamin, will later be born, and these 12 sons will head the 12 tribes of Israel. But getting there wasn't so pretty, was it? Not at all the Happily Ever After we prefer to see in our romances. Instead, siblings and slaves were set against each other in a competition over which they had no control and no voice, and Jacob not only gets to be deceived as he deceived others; he gets to have a large, dysfunctional, angry family, like the one he came out of, except that his family of origin was smaller. Far from holding up any models of virtue or domestic happiness for us, these stories have so far just made us realize that our culture and times aren't nearly as bad as we thought they were, compared to that of the Bible. And this kind of behavior was certainly not unique to the Hebrew people; it was absolutely commonplace and universal. But within the Hebrew faith and the Scriptures, there *will be* a trajectory towards monogamy, at least, if not towards any real kind of protections or rights for women or slaves, as the time of Christ approaches. And here's something to keep in mind—all of these meeting a woman at the well stories from the Old Testament, should help us see one particular New Testament story in a new light. Jesus meets a woman at the well in the Gospel of John, does he not? And in complete contradiction to these Old Testament tales, they have an actual conversation, in which her words are recorded and Christ treats her as a human being with dignity and worth. Their conversation

changes her life. In the Kingdom of God, no one is chattel and all are valued. But, it takes a while to get there, and in fact, we still struggle with this concept in a whole variety of ways, don't we?

Before we judge too harshly the folks in this story, we should probably ask ourselves some searching questions. Although this story is ancient, nearly 3000 years old, is it not still a bit of a mirror for our culture and ways? How much, for example, do we tend to judge others based on appearance? Isn't it a lot better to be attractive than unattractive, especially if you're female, even now? Do those who have some unfortunate physical characteristic feel second rate, invisible, to others? Do we help to perpetuate a culture that is super focused on appearance, through our purchases, our preferences, our actions?

And how often do we forget to consider the impact of our decisions on those who are without power or voice? And who are those people? Women, yes, in some parts of the world or our own country? Girls and boys being trafficked? Minimum wage workers? Refugees? The elderly who have no one to advocate for them in an increasingly complex and sometimes hostile health care system? Those who have little voice are still easily overlooked, whether in political process or economic decisions. As primarily white, middle class folks of some level of education, we need to remember---we *do* have voice. We *do* have power and influence. Are we using it to safeguard those who don't?

And what about karma? Do we recognize that some of what happens to us, that we don't much like, is in fact a result of our own actions? That not everything is someone else's fault, but sometimes we're just getting payback for carelessness or thoughtlessness or unkindness? There's little comfort in this recognition, but at least it's a step towards honesty, and potentially, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, whatever might be possible.

This isn't, sadly, exactly a happy story. But it *is* a story of faithfulness; God's faithfulness. God, who we already noted in this sermon series, can draw straight with crooked lines. Even lines as crooked as Jacob, as Rebekkah, as Laban. God intends to create a people of Israel that will be a blessing to the whole earth, that will both glorify God and live justly among others, that will be a beacon of light in a dark world. This God will do. And God hasn't given up on Jacob, the heel, the trickster, who is finally getting some of his own medicine. Throughout these years Jacob is having some of those edges of his ground down, and when we encounter him next week, he will be truly ready for the world's most astonishing wrestling match. Stay tuned. Amen.