

Double or Nothing

By
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from the pulpit of
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Genesis 29:15-28

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” ¹⁹Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. ²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” ²²So Laban gathered together all the

people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵When 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?” ²⁶Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Leave it to the Bible to be so scandalous. The world likes to think that religious people are prim and proper. Avoiding any whiff of indignity. Especially us Presbyterians, descendants of a kind of puritanical English heritage. Puritans of course were once famously described as people who live with “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere is having a good time.” Now that might be a bit too critical of our forebearers, but our Christian history is bound up with our heightened sense of offence at unseemly behavior.

Which is why the scripture reading today is almost too embarrassing for me to read; reflecting the wildly imperfect and broken world of God’s people in Genesis. Here the scoundrel Jacob, who, we remember, stole his brother Esau’s birthright by deceiving his nearly blind father Isaac, has now fled east for his safety, and fallen head over heels for a woman named Rachel. And now he has to have her.

We are, of course, mindful that we are encountering the patriarchy of antiquity that relegates women to inferior status. So if we should hold up this text with any kind of integrity, we must be willing to not only face that painful truth, but to also look within, around, and beyond it, so that we can wrestle some kind of good news out of it.

Rachel, whom the text describes as graceful and beautiful, has left Jacob star-eyed. He is in love with her. And so in this spirit of love, a big wedding is planned.

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Weddings can be wonderful affairs. They are an opportunity for people to come together in merriment. For families to celebrate their new unity. And in the ancient world, for entire communities to lay aside the busyness of their days for a week long festivity. There was nothing like a wedding to give folks an extended break from their labors and join in the happy affair. While we don’t have seven-day weddings anymore, we

know that weddings are still incredibly complex planning events. A lot of time is put into preparing for one.

According to experts, the wedding industrial complex is worth \$21.5 billion. From photographers to venues to clothes to cuisine, the industry works hard to rattle the retirement accounts for anyone who wants to say “I do.”

And over the years I’ve seen weddings bring out the best and the worst in people as they nearly pull their hair out to get all of the details just right. And because everyone’s nerves can be so frayed by the time the day arrives, even the smallest overlooked detail can be enough to spell disaster.

Once for a Sunday afternoon wedding, the groom forgot to set his watch forward after Daylight Saving Time and he and his best man nearly missed the ceremony. And I thought of Miss Havisham from that old classic novel *Great Expectations*. Remember her? She’s left at the altar by her swindler fiancé and she spends the rest of her days in her wedding dress, walking around her decaying mansion wearing just one shoe.

Weddings are also really cultural snapshots as well, reflecting the styles and preferences of the day. My mother’s wedding dress sleeves were so puffy with silk fabric it looked like she was preparing to parachute in on D-Day. I recently saw silent footage of a wedding held here in the sanctuary in the late 1930s, as men with top hats and ladies in mink seemed to glamorously waltz through our great wooden front doors. A marriage ceremony is a distillation of a people, a time, and perhaps more than anything, a wild hope for a future.

In any event, the morning after the wedding feast here in Genesis 29, the sun’s rays peak into the tent and reveal that it is not Rachel whom Jacob has just been given in marriage the night before, but her sister, Leah. Jacob is incensed. He has spent his entire life trying to find what will

make him happy. And he is sure he has found it in Rachel. And now, just as he says to himself, “ah, now I have arrived,” he sees in the daylight what the wine obscured in the dark. It was Leah.

He says to his new father-in-law, “Why have you done this to me?” And we would be forgiven if we didn’t just want to howl at the irony. The trickster, Jacob, has met his match in Laban. Laban says to him in reply, “You longed for my younger daughter. But that’s not how it’s done around here. The oldest get married first. If you would like to take Rachel as a wife, be good to Leah and work for me another seven years and you can wed Rachel after your honeymoon is over.”

For all we know Jacob may have been steaming hot, but all the text tells us is that he did exactly as Laban requested. It was double or nothing.

And it’s worth fleshing out what is going on with the language here. While Leah is described as having “lovely eyes” in our pew Bible, that’s not quite as clean a translation in the original Hebrew. The word we see as *lovely* also can mean *weak*, *delicate*, or even *ineffective*. A consensus among biblical scholars seems to translate the phrase as “Leah had poor eyesight.” Which is not a very flattering way to describe a young woman. But it illustrates the glaring point that Rachel is beautiful and Leah is plain.

Once again, the younger child seems to get all the luck. And after our reading ends comes that terribly sad verse: “But Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah.” Leah and Rachel, just like their husband and his own brother, will battle it out in jealousy the rest of their lives. But here in these verses, a reversal of luck happens. Leah is Jacob’s first wife. And that choice has divine implications. Because it will be Leah who will bear most of Jacob’s sons, while Rachel will find it very difficult to conceive. The children of Israel born from the complicated setting of two sisters.

Now let me say a word here about Leah. I love Leah, and I want us to respect her in this story and also recognize how this character functions.

We have a habit of thinking that once we have what we long for then everything will be just perfect. The right job. The right relationships. The right house. The right children. The right church. And we get it and go to bed and it's Leah by the morning.

We think that whatever our "Rachel" is will make life complete. But the night comes and it's always "Leah" by sunrise. The voids we seek to fill in our lives cannot be filled by anything the world can give us. That's not disillusionment or cynicism, that's just the truth.

Which is why the Bible's stories in Genesis are so wonderful. They are not divine stories of the gods. There is no frolicking on Mount Olympus here. Nor are they stories about moral heroes. There is not a single person in this story that we should seek to emulate. There is tragedy written all over this. No, these are stories about us. About our own human frailties and idiosyncrasies. About our shortcomings and failures. About our hopes and dreams, for us and our children and their children. And ultimately, they are about Gods' grace that we neither earn nor deserve.

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I suspect we've all been Jacob at one time or another; whenever we have found ourselves crushed by a lie. Or when we've been taken by a friend, family member, or acquaintance, and played for a fool. How often have we felt that sting, and the loss of a dream at the hands of another? And how many times have we betrayed others, offering our own lies in ways large and small?

In the end, Jacob becomes the final and true patriarch of the people Israel. His twelve sons each give rise to one of the twelve tribes of the ancient Hebrew people. And through them and their descendants God has decided to bless the whole earth—including one born in a small and insignificant way in Bethlehem to a girl named Mary. This isn't the end of Jacob's story here.

These characters in Genesis are rich because there is so much drama and dysfunction, and most of the time it is self-created. They read like an ancient soap opera. And when people told these stories generation after generation, they functioned as a kind of parabolic warning. They reminded the listener that God uses all kinds of characters to fulfill God's purposes. And in a comforting way, they remind us that all of us have the capacity to be instruments for holy work.

Yet at the same time that God's presence is a comforting presence, it is also a transformative presence as God deals with our brokenness. Just as God did with Jacob. So that it can be recognized and abandoned as the death that it is. We think that our Rachels will save us, but sooner or later the sun comes up.

And we should remember that Jacob was chosen by God before any of his foolishness. This isn't a story about Jacob getting his life right so that he can be saved. This is God saving Jacob and then transforming him, slowly over time, and molding him into a new person, even yet through the consequences of Jacob's poor and selfish life choices. Transformation from God always begins out of God's deep love for us.

St. Paul wrote this to the church in Rome, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to God's purpose." Notice that he does not call all things *good*.

No, Paul says God takes all things—even horrible, painful, and horrific things, things that are our own fault and things that are the result of living in a sinful world—and God works in them and turns them into salvation for us in the end.

Jacob's life choices may determine the timing and context of God's fulfilled promises, but Jacob is not the master of his own fate. Neither

are we. For in the slow and sure work of God, everything works together for good.

It really is an embarrassing story. But I'd be willing to bet it's some of the best news I could share with you. The good news of our scandalous God. And what God is willing to do through you, and has already done for you.

Amen.