

“Is Love Enough?”

Sunday, July 30th, 2017

8th Sunday after Pentecost

#3 of 4: Jacob: God’s Unlikely Choice

Genesis 29:15-28 (NRSV)

Then 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

So, last week we heard about Jacob's dream and how it had transformed Jacob into a better man.

Jacob continues on his journey and arrives at his destination, the region of his Uncle Laban.

He comes upon shepherds tending Laban's flocks; with them is Laban's daughter, Rachel.

For Jacob, it is love at first sight and he kisses Rachel and tells her he is.

She runs to tell her father that Jacob has arrived and he is thrilled.

By modern standards, this story is a little weird; we're not in the habit of, I hope, of kissing first and introducing later, or of falling in love with our first cousins.

But, we need to understand this story from within its ancient context.

This is the story of the Mothers and Fathers of Israel and their descendants, the people of Israel.

This is a family who practices intra-marriage.

Jacob's grandparents, Sarah and Abraham, were siblings.

His grand-uncle Nahor married his own niece, Jacob's aunt Milcah.

His cousin Lot fathered children with his own daughters.

Rebekah sent Jacob to Laban with instructions to marry one of his cousins.

It may seem bizarre to us, but it was the custom of the times in which they lived.

So, the back story is that Jacob tells Laban that he wants to marry Rachel and an agreement is struck where Jacob will work for seven years in exchange for this marriage.

This is where today's lesson begins.

Let us pray... Lord, we do not always understand the ancient customs of your people described in the Bible. We do our best to read these stories through their eyes and we ask that you help us to come away with a lesson from this story that applies to our modern context. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Beatles sang that, "*All you need is love;*" we've been told that "*love makes the world go around.*"

We've heard about the "*power of love,*" and sometimes we think we, "*can't help falling in love.*"

Music, film, and Lifetime movies have convinced us that this romantic notion of love in our culture can solve a lot of our problems.

Falling in love can cure loneliness and **being** in love "*completes us.*"

I'm not so sure that this is the kind of love that the writers of Genesis are concerned with.

This story is told entirely from Jacob's perspective.

We've always been told that Jacob loved Rachel so much that he eventually works fourteen years to have her and the time goes by "*in the blink of an eye*" for him.

But, this story has no interest in Rachel's or Leah's lives or their experience during those years.

Rachel's feelings for Jacob are never discussed.

Leah and Rachel are given to Jacob like property.

(In fact, no woman in the Bible is ever described as "loving" anyone else, in the sense of romance.)

This story is a challenge for all contemporary readers, but particularly for women.

It is a story told entirely from a male perspective and it seems to be written for a male audience.

It is a story that speaks from the ancient patriarchal society in which Jacob lived, but it speaks to us in a culture where this perspective is no longer valid.

We can see this story through our contemporary lens and realize that cultural change has caused us to re-examine biblical stories to determine what lessons we can learn today.

We are faced with several challenges in this text.

Laban's claim that he could not give his younger daughter in marriage before the elder one has no foundation in the text.

Even if it were the case, why didn't Laban tell Jacob that in the beginning?

So, Laban begins this relationship based on dishonesty.

The text suggests that maybe he could only marry Leah off through deception; there is apparently something strange about her eyes.

And maybe the hardest thing to comprehend: *How could Jacob not know with whom he is being intimate?*

Was it completely, blindingly dark?

Were they both completely silent?

Was Jacob too drunk from the party to notice?

All of this is contrary to the biblical sense of intimate “*knowing*” that is part of the beauty of marriage.

Then there’s the relationship between sisters Leah and Rachel.

We don’t know what their relationship as sisters was like before Jacob came along.

We can certainly see how sibling rivalry builds as they get involved with Jacob.

Leah may well have felt undervalued all along, with her weird eyes and Rachel’s beauty.

It would seem so, since her father felt it necessary to lie in order to get her a husband.

And Jacob made it clear who he preferred.

The irony in this story should not be ignored.

Laban’s deception is very like the way in which Jacob and his mother pulled the “bait and switch” to secure Isaac’s deathbed blessing.

In the end, Jacob suffers the consequences of the sibling rivalry he participated in causing.

He also gets tangled up in the rivalry between his wives and their slaves, Bilhah and Zilpah.

He may be the father of the Twelve Tribes, but these four women are the mothers and they compete for Jacob's time and attention as each one strives to be the "significant other."

As we look this unusual family and its strained relationships, we see that maybe love is not enough, love may not be the answer, and love does not make their world go 'round.

Even if Jacob's love for Rachel is sincere and not based on her appearance, his love does not translate into a happy healthy family.

The question for us is how do we take something away from this story that makes sense in our culture?

Some people elevate romantic and sexual love as the highest expression of love.

That seems like a selfish and emotional viewpoint.

I wondered how to connect this view of romantic love with the commandment Jesus gave to us love God and to love others.

I saw that loving God really means seeking to do those things that honor God and are obedient to God.

Loving others seems to be about doing and saying things that honor and value others; thinking about what the other needs; respecting others for their uniqueness.

In both cases, I see this as **outwardly** focused; love that originates with God seeks to be selfless, not self-serving.

The romantic, sexual love portrayed in movies, on television, and on the Internet, does not seem to focus on selflessness.

Instead, “*love*” here is about immediate, self-gratification with little concern for consequences or long-term happiness.

I doubt this is what God had in mind.

Love and passion certainly have a place in our romantic relationships.

There is no doubt that God intended this from the beginning

However, passion *without* caring perverts God's original intention.

Love, at its core, is about "*caring for,*" not "*taking from.*"

Once again, Jacob turns out to be somewhat less than heroic in pursuit of his destiny to father all nations.

He picks the prettiest girl and kisses her before he introduces himself; then, he sets out to make her his wife.

For some reason, he doesn't even care enough to be certain of who he's sleeping with on his wedding night.

No, love is not enough for Jacob!

This story illustrates a common practice of reducing people, women in particular, to their physical appearance.

Rachel was beautiful; Leah had peculiar eyes.

“She is too fat, too thin; too short, too tall,” and so forth.

Our culture is obsessed with outward appearances.

We rely on website photos to decide who to pick on a dating app.

The same is true of women seeking men.

All of this serves to nurture the idea that “love” is about the best-looking, most satisfying physical specimen we can catch.

This sort of love is **NOT** enough...Maybe that’s why more than half of marriages in America end in divorce.

God gave us the ability to love one another by **first** loving us unconditionally.

We are given to each other by the same God who created us and loved us.

We are expected to share God’s love with one another, not seek only to satisfy our passion.

So, *“Is love enough?”*

It certainly can be, if we follow God’s example.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**