

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis VII. Jacob Grows Up – A Little

Genesis 29:15-28 15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" 16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." 19 Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. 21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." 22 So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. 23 But 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.) 25 When morning came, behold 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?" 26 Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. 27 Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." 28 Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

I am sort of amazed that HBO or Cinemax haven't built a series on this family and its twists and turns. The plot elements would seem to be perfect for one of those titillating late-night mini-series, wouldn't they? Over the last eight weeks as we have followed this family we have seen the following topics and themes: sibling rivalry, dysfunctional marriages, surrogate motherhood, the banishing of a child, parents seeming to play favorites of one child over the other, nasty tricks with irrevocable consequences paid by people one supposedly loves, and on and on. And today's story adds a very explicit, not-suitable-for-viewing-before-9 p.m., R-rated element to this ongoing story. For today's scripture describing the further misadventures of the latest generation of our "first family in faith" now adds in the topics of love and sex and polygamy! I would think the ratings would go through the roof!

But before we see what our favorite fractious family has done now, let's catch up with the story. To recap: Jacob has been running for his life. Always the smart guy, always the planner and plotter, he managed to not only steal his brother Esau's birthright away from him in a stupid trade that Jacob knew that Esau – simple, impulsive Esau – would take, but he also connived with their mother Rebekah to steal the final near-death paternal blessing from Esau that their father, Isaac, should have rightfully given Esau as the first-born. It's a tawdry tale, isn't it? And while Esau may have been simple-minded sometimes, he was not stupid, and he realized what Jacob had done to him and he is, at first, devastated by his failure to receive the blessing that would have made him the head of the family – after all, he'd worked hard all his life in anticipation of that final paternal blessing. But after devastation came the rage, and he vowed to kill his brother – thus righting these wrongs and putting him back in the position of number one son complete with blessing and birthright. And his vow was not an empty one; you may recall that Esau was a skilled hunter, a master of both the bow and the knife. Jacob would have had no chance. So their mother Rebekah frantically packs a bag for Jacob and tells him to flee to her uncle Laban's house and farm many, many miles away. He will be safe there, for not only is he kin but the very serious law of hospitality of that day and time obligated his Uncle Laban to defend Jacob to the death should Esau try to attack him there. So Jacob flees. And, as we saw two weeks ago, he had this marvelous dream while camped along the way, the dream of the ladder into heaven with the angels climbing it and God himself – in a completely undeserved display of grace – tells Jacob that he will continue to be with him and guide him and bless him. And Jacob treats that pronouncement as simply an offer by God to negotiate and Jacob says that if God will do those things, why Jacob will magnanimously give God 10% of his resources. What a guy.

So our story today opens with Jacob at his Uncle Laban's farm. He's been there

a month now, accepting his uncle Laban's hospitality and protection. But you know what they say about fish and houseguests, and Laban decides that things need to now go differently, and that if Jacob is to hang around they need to re-negotiate the terms of his being there. So he says to Jacob, "*Son, have you thought about what I should be paying you for your work here?*" While put very politely, it's very clear that Laban is ready for Jacob to earn his keep and quit just hanging around. It's also a crafty negotiating strategy, and – as we shall see – Laban, like his sister Rebekah, absolutely excelled at craftiness, for any negotiator will tell you that if you can get the other guy to make the first offer he'll likely undervalue himself and you will then have the upper hand. Given everything that's happened up to now, we would have expected Jacob – crafter and conniver extraordinaire – to have outfoxed Laban. But he doesn't. Jacob is off his game. His con man skills aren't as sharp as they usually are. Why? Well, you see, Jacob is in love. When he first arrived at his uncle's farm, he saw Laban's daughter Rachel – and was smitten at first sight. And then, in verses that we didn't read today and which happen a bit before our scripture for this morning, it is clear that the attraction is mutual and that during his month of being Laban's houseguest he and Rachel talked and talked and talked and found something deeply, mutually attractive. So instead of negotiating with Laban – and remember, this is the man who had the gall to negotiate with God! – Jacob simply names an amazing "wage" for his work: If Laban will allow him to marry Rachel, he'll work for Laban for 7 years first for free. One can only say "wow." This isn't the Jacob we'd come to know and despise!

Laban agrees. And then in one of the sweetest lines, I think, in all of the Bible, Jacob's next seven years are described like this: "*So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for Rachel.*" But now the seven years is up and Jacob wants to claim his "wages." Laban *seemingly* agrees, but after seeing what happens you can look back on his words here and see

that they are in fact very ambiguous about giving Jacob Rachel. So a wedding is arranged. And this is no stop-by-the-church-and-get-it-done-quick wedding; no, this is the ancient middle east and the wedding celebration went on for a week. Finally, at the end of the week of celebrating, the bride and groom are alone for the very first time, and this, of course, is where this story earns its R – or at least PG13 – rating. One historian, who has researched the wedding customs of the day, describes what would have happened as follows:

The bride and groom are both bathed, anointed with oil and perfume, and dressed in special clothes.... Throughout the ceremony the bride remains veiled. The bride is accompanied by bridesmaids and the groom by his attendants..... The public ceremonies begin with Jacob and his companions processing to Rachel's home. There [is the] giving and receiving presents, [and] a few drinks (which poor Jacob downs with a bit more gusto than is prudent). [Then,] the marriage contract would be read out and a public declaration made by the groom: "She is my wife...." Then all the guests toast the couple with a blessing, and the party continues. The evening concludes with the groom... wrapping his cloak around his veiled bride and, escorted by the parents and bridal attendants, he leads her

into his tent.¹

I don't need to tell you what comes next. Suffice it to say that it does. But not the way Jacob expected. For the next morning, he discovers that it is not in fact Rachel but her sister Leah whom he just spent the night with and whom he is now married to. I love the way the King James Version translates the line describing that post-wedding night morning: "*When morning came, behold, it was Leah!*" Now, if you want the full

¹David Leininger, drawing from *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*
<http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Lein/OT/Gen%2029.15-28,%20FamilyFeud.htm>

effect of the original word in Hebrew that gets safely and meekly translated as “Behold,” substitute the strongest expletive you know.² That’s what Jacob felt. “**Behold!!!**” Now, you might ask: How could this have happened? Well, it was dark, and the custom of the day was that Leah in fact would not have unveiled her face even when they were alone after Jacob carried her into the tent, and, probably most of all, as the phrase goes that I see in so many newspaper stories about dumb or even tragic things, “police suspect alcohol was involved.” Jacob complains bitterly to Laban: you tricked me. Now this is rich, this is very rich. For I suspect our first response to Jacob is to think a certain sort of poetic justice was done. For this is the man who connived to steal and trick his brother out of what was rightfully his, who knew no shame in committing fraud on his blind and dying father, who had the gall to bargain with God.

And how did Laban respond to Jacob’s complaint? Well, he tells Jacob can **also** have Rachel as his wife – if he works for him another seven years. Now, from everything that we have learned about Jacob so far we would have expected him to be seething, and, in the old phrase, not get mad but get even. The man who tricked his father and brother is surely now going to be the man who outwits his uncle and tricks him right back in some way.

But he doesn’t. For maybe, just maybe, Jacob has grown up – a little. And maybe, just maybe, he is finding that there is a certain despair in always working your way through life by deception and trickery. Maybe, just maybe, the love he has had for Rachel for seven years has matured him. And – and here is where his story connects with our stories – maybe, just maybe, Jacob comes to realize that he is face to face here with one of those difficult ethical choices in life. Now, when you think about it, the hard ethical choices in your life or in my life are not the ones between something that is good and something that is evil. Those kinds of choices may be excruciatingly hard

²http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=7/27/2008#

and painful to carry out, but they're not usually that difficult to *identify*. No, the toughest choices in life come when you or I are faced with a situation where what we have before us is the choice between two things that are bad, or two things that are not as good as we wish they were. Good and evil, by comparison, are easy; discerning and choosing amidst those situations in life where we are forced to decide what is the least bad way to behave are the ones that are heartbreaking. It was not good for Jacob to have to work for Laban for another seven years; but it also would not have been good for Jacob to find a way to continue the trickery and one-up his uncle. Part of what happens with maturity is the realization that one of the hardest things about life is that it indeed has little black-and-white in it, but is mostly painted in shades of gray, in shades of ambiguity. And so Jacob chooses the least-bad, and Jacob grows up – a little.

This story also confirms what God has continued to try to tell you and me and every generation of Christian: that God is at work to patiently and persistently move even the scoundrels towards a better possibility, a better life, a life more lived in the knowledge of the care of God, a life that doesn't think it has to depend solely on its own devices. In 1860 the Rev. Theodore Park uttered a line that would become one of Dr. Martin Luther King's favorites: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."³ The arc of the story of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob bends slowly towards greater good. The going is slow because God has to work with folks like Jacob, God has to contend with Jacob's machinations and maneuvering. For, as I have said more than once, God doesn't force the divine will on us; God respects our free will and we can muck things up if we want. And Jacob certainly did, as did his whole family. But slowly, surely, even if in fits and starts, the moral arc of this family's story moves towards higher possibility, toward good and away from evil. Is there "backsliding," as the old term goes? Of course. But God has promised Jacob

³<http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/05/11/1118/>

and us and the whole world that He will patiently, persistently, and unfailingly continue to move us and our world toward higher good, even amidst the backsliding. I think one of the clearest examples of that can be found when we contrast the way women are treated in this story with the way that we would find this utterly objectionable and wrong now! Did you notice it: neither Rachel nor Leah has one thing to say in this story, they were not asked their opinions about what was going to happen. Or that Leah's opinion about being forced to marry a man she didn't love knowing that her sister did wasn't even considered? Or that Leah and Rachel are treated simply as property – because that is what they were – whose role was to be the best investment possible for Laban. But, my friends, the “moral arc of the universe bends towards justice” and the fact that we notice this and are bothered by it is evidence of that arc. Have we arrived? No. Too much discrimination still occurs. The voices of women are still too often not heard in the way they should be. But that moral arc, and the persistent, patient presence of God continues to nudge us and the world to a more equitable and just state of affairs more and more of the time.

A Sunday School teacher was telling another of these old Genesis stories. With great drama, she made the story come alive. The students were perched on the edge of their seats, mouths open, anticipating what was next. Suddenly one of the students became so nervous he shouted, "Oh, please, stop - the story is too hard!" and he began to cry. Gently and confidently, another child exclaimed, "Oh, don't be silly. This is one of God's stories and they always come out right."⁴ The moral arc of the universe is long, but it will move Jacob and it will move you and move me towards lives lived ever more nearly as the people of God. And for that very good news, thanks be to God!

⁴Adapted from <http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Lein/OT/Gen%2029.15-28,%20FamilyFeud.htm>