

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
July 23, 2023  
Genesis 29:15-28  
Connecting Through Imperfect Relationships

This summer Rebekah and I are sharing scriptures and preaching about the ways we live into our call to be in community. Rebekah has been preaching from healing stories in the Gospel of Mark, and I am sharing stories from Genesis – a narrative of one of our ancestors Jacob. Both of these scriptural arcs include stories that can be challenging in our 21st century world, with situations that are uncomfortable, and characters that are hard to lift up as paragons of the faith. And yet God is present in each of the narratives. This morning we continue Jacob's story.

When we left Jacob two weeks ago, he had fled the home of his parents Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and twin brother Esau had been battling their whole lives to be the top dog in the family - the one to receive the benefits of being the first born. Esau came out of the womb first, but Jacob extorts the birthright from Esau. And then to pour salt in the wound, Jacob with the help of his mother Rebekah, tricked his father Isaac into giving him a blessing, instead of giving it to Esau. After Esau threatens to kill his brother, Rebekah instructs Jacob that he should leave home to go live at his Uncle Laban's house in Haran. To keep the peace with her husband Isaac, Rebekah tells him that she will just die if Jacob marries a local girl. So Isaac calls Jacob, blesses and charges him saying, "Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May God give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you..."

Jacob left home and we heard how Jacob experienced the presence of God in a dream. He named the place where he met God Bethel, and dedicated it to the Lord. Jacob continued on his journey, eventually coming to a well where people gathered to water their flocks of sheep. There Jacob met Rachel, his uncle Laban's daughter and he was smitten. He was so taken by Rachel, that in a scene straight from a meet-cute in a romantic comedy, he rolled the heavy stone from the top of the well, watered the flock of sheep Rachel had brought, and kissed her, weeping with joy. Rachel, equally joyous, runs to tell her father. When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. We pick up Jacob's story here in Genesis 29 verse 15 after he had resided with Laban for a month.

---

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 weak, but 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 his love 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 the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

---

The plot is straight out of a soap opera. Jacob the trickster, the one who convinced his brother Esau to trade his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup, the one who tricked his father into giving him a blessing instead of his brother has now been bested at trickery. His father-in-law has tricked him into marrying older sister Leah rather than Rachel whom he loves. General Hospital eat your heart out! Conventional wisdom is that Jacob got his just rewards – especially when Laban answers his question about deceit with the words “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn.”

Jacob the trickster has now been bested at trickery. We hear the talk at the well - what comes around, goes around. You reap, what you sow. This is a deep-seated belief in our world – even if we understand intellectually that there is not a cause and effect relationship. We see it in literature and the media from fairy tales to Star Wars. We hear it in our language – the popularity of the Hindu concept of karma as an explanation for everything from your credit (which can be fixed with the Credit Karma app) to failed relationships, as Alicia Keys sings in her song *Karma* “What goes around, comes around. What goes up, must come down.”<sup>1</sup>

On the surface the story of Jacob seems to fit nicely into this narrative. Jacob’s manipulations did get him the honor and blessing of being treated as the first born son. And while this will reap him financial benefits, in the end it meant he had to leave his home and family and seek community with distant kin. When he meets the love of his life, who happens to be the younger sister, he is tricked into marrying the older sister. The story continues with rivalry and intrigue between the two sisters that mirrors the struggles Jacob had with Esau. What goes around, comes around.

The text is clear that Jacob loved Rachel. He loved her so much he agreed to work an additional seven years for his uncle to be able to marry her. Rachel was consistently honored by Jacob. And yet it was Leah who bears Jacob four sons in quick succession, Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. Yes – Judah. Remember him from the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew... Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah .... down to Jesse the father of King David. It was Leah who bore Jacob the son that carried the lineage Isaac promised him.

Rachel, the beloved one of Jacob, had yet to bear him any children. Rachel envied her sister, setting up a rivalry between the two of them. So as was the custom, Rachel gave Jacob her maid Bilhah who birthed two more sons. To keep the birth war going, Leah gave Joseph her

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/aliciakeys/karma.html>

maid Zilpah, who birthed two more sons. Then Leah herself gave birth to two more sons. So if you are keeping score, we are up to 10 sons. Leah also gave birth to a daughter – Dinah.

After the 10 sons and 1 daughter born to Jacob by Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Rachel then conceives and gives birth to a son she names Joseph. Now many years later, Rachel will die after she gives birth to a final son of Jacob, named Benjamin. Now for those of you who know the story of Joseph and his brothers, you can see how Joseph might have become the favorite son of his father. He was the first son conceived from his love Rachel. I was not kidding when I said this passage has bit of a soap opera feel to it.

So what are we to do with this big and complicated family? Commentators have noted that text is not clear as to whether this is solely Laban's doing, or if the sisters are involved in the plot. As minister Ashley Wilcox writes in *The Women's Lectionary*, "There is a frustrating lack of detail in this description, leaving the reader to wonder who knew what when. Do Rachel and Leah know about their father's plan? All of the people in the place of the marriage ceremony – are they all in on it? What do Rachel and Leah think of this exchange? Jacob has been living with this family for seven years; surely he should have been able to tell the difference between the sisters!"<sup>2</sup>

And we also have Leah and Rachel's two maids, Bilhah and Zilpah. As Wilcox notes, "In a text where women are treated as property, there are still layers of privilege and autonomy. Leah and Rachel have power over Zilpah and Bilhah. They use these women's bodies for offspring, giving them to their husband and then naming and claiming their children. Bilhah and Zilpah are mentioned only as property, to be used for work and sex. Unlike Rachel and Leah [the other women] they have no distinguishing characteristics and churches have largely forgotten them."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed. The story of this big and complicated family gets even messier, when Jacob decides it time for him and his wives and their maids and 12 children (Benjamin had not been born) and all of the livestock to return to his homeland. More deception happens – with both Laban and Jacob trying to outwit each other with respect to the sheep and goats each gets ownership to. Rachel gets into the action as well, stealing the household gods from her father Laban.

So what are we to do with this big and complicated family? As I shared in the words of preparation in the bulletin, the Rev. Beth Tanners challenges us saying, "It is easy to sit in judgment of Jacob and Laban. We can sit comfortably on a Sunday morning and condemn their actions and their culture and thank God we have evolved. But that would mean we miss the point of the narrative completely. They are not "them." They are us. We are far from perfect. Families are messy and often broken. We hurt each other intentionally and unintentionally. We act in our own best interest and against the greater good of others. We forget to ask those with less power about decisions that impact their lives. To look on this family is to look straight into human brokenness."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ashley M. Wilcox. *The Women's Lectionary. Preaching the Women of the Bible Throughout the Year.* Westminster John Knox Press., 2021. p181

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Beth L. Tanner. Commentary on Genesis 29:15-28. *Working Preacher Commentaries.* Available online at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17/commentary-on-genesis-2915-28-4>

I was struck by Rev. Tanner's words because as I read the narrative arc of Jacob's life I wanted to put in him a box – to sit in judgement of him – as a man who got his just desserts for the trickery he did against his brother. And likewise I could easily dismiss Laban as not just deceitful manipulator, but also an abusive father who toyed with the lives of his daughters. Jacob and Laban acted in their own best interests and against the greater good of others. This is all true. The story could end with the two men perpetuating a feud that lasted for generations. Instead, in Genesis 31, we hear Jacob and Laban give impassioned speeches about how their lives have been intertwined. Jacob reminds Laban that he has served him for a total of 20 years and that what he taken for his household reflects the labor of his hands. And Laban recognizes that Jacob's wives are his daughters and their children his grandchildren. After all of the bitterness and trickery and rivalry, all of the ugliness and distrust, Jacob and Laban recognize their brokenness, and through the God's grace they are able see new possibilities for their lives, which are now forever intertwined.

Jacob and Laban made a covenant, with God as their witness. Jacob marks the spot with a pillar of stones and Laban with a heap of stones. They share a meal together. They agree that the pillar of stone and the heap of stones mark the place where neither will pass to harm the other. Laban offers these words of reconciliation, "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other." Then early in the morning Laban rose up and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home. And then Jacob began a long journey home.

It is easy to sit in judgment of Jacob and Laban. We can sit comfortably on a Sunday morning and condemn their actions and their culture and thank God we have evolved. And yet God is present for both Laban and Jacob. God is present with them not in spite of their imperfections, not in spite of their failures, not in spite of their very human proclivities to do the wrong thing, over and over again. No, God is present because of their very human brokenness. God is present in their broken relationships. God works to reconcile them to each other.

There is redemption for Jacob and Laban. Laban models for Jacob the power of reaching out to one with whom you are estranged. Jacob will follow this lead as he reconciles with his brother Esau. Relationships that seemed irreversibly severed, with no hope of connection can be redeemed. You think there is dysfunction in your family, and that there is no way you can share Thanksgiving dinner together – think about Jacob and Laban sharing a meal after all of their family drama. Reconciliation is possible through the love and grace of a God who meets us in all of our broken places. Through a God who became flesh and dwelt among us, tending our wounds, restoring us to community, and empowering us to be present for each other. This is the call on all our lives. This is the call for us as a church. I invite you to join me as we share our Affirmation of Faith, words from the Confession of Belhar, a confession written as a response to the Dutch Reformed Mission Church's acknowledgement of their complicity in upholding apartheid in South Africa.