

Text: Genesis 29: 15-28  
Title: The Tale of the Unwanted Wife  
Date: 07.30.23  
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Dear friends, once again, we're stuck with a sermon text with no mention of God. There's no spiritual salve, no moral guidance, and no clear application to contemporary life. This morning's passage reads like a tale of King Arthur's Round Table or the prequel to a polygamous version of Little House on the Prairie.

So, when the gap between today and the text is marked by thousands of years, thousands of miles, and immeasurable differences of culture, language, technology, cosmology, and marital practices – what are we make of it? What does this ancient story have to say to our modern midwestern lives?

Let's sit with it for a few minutes....

Jacob conspired with his mother to trick his father that he might gain his brother's birthright. Esau (the brother) was rightly enraged and determined to avenge the wrong. Jacob, in turn, goes on the lam, fleeing to his mother's brother, Uncle Laban.

But as Jacob arrived on Laban's land, he met Rachel. And she must have made quite an impression, because when his uncle asked about his salary requirements Jacob's answer was simple: your daughter....

He was smitten with Rachel – his cousin. Our text reads that she had a “lovely figure and was beautiful.” Other translations have it that she was “lovely in form.” Historians note that this was no passing crush or fleeting infatuation. Jacob was willing to serve seven years for Rachel – an amount extraordinarily-excessively beyond the going rate for dowries. But, as our text reads:

*...Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.*

The next verse is sanitized for our Sunday-go-to-meetin' sensibilities. After seven years, Jacob goes to his uncle and says,

*My time is complete and I want to make love to her....*

It's a little more colorful in Hebrew.  
As a one scholar writes:

*...This statement is so blunt, so graphic, so sexual, so over the top and inappropriate and non-customary, that over the centuries, Jewish commentators have had to do all kinds of backpedaling to explain it. But it's not that hard to explain. The narrator is showing us a man driven by and overwhelmed with emotional and sexual longing for one woman.*

Which brings us to the other woman – Leah.

Our text reads that Leah had “weak eyes.” But that Hebrew adjective can also be translated as “tender,” “lovely,” “delicate,” or “nice.” That’s quite a range of meanings. Some think she was cross-eyed or somehow disfigured. That seems like excessive speculation....

Jacob was in love with Rachel and not Leah. He wanted the younger sister and not the older sister. Isn’t that reason enough? There’s no cause to imagine Leah as one of Cinderella’s mean-ugly-step-sisters....

Laban, the father of the bride, throws a big wedding party. Everyone was there. The festivities would have included heavy feasting, heavy drinking, and the wearing of a heavy veil.

Therefore, maybe Jacob was drunk and duped by what his bride wore. Maybe the issue wasn’t Leah’s weak eyes, but Jacob was the one with unfocused vision. Because...

Because, Jacob sleeps with his bride, satisfies his seven-year longing, and consummates his marriage. Que the violins, let the sun rise over amber waves of grain and the fruited plain. This is the dawning of the first day of the rest of their lives. Thanks be to God.

Except. *Hinneh!* Except, in the middle of the next sentence there’s a Hebrew exclamation. It’s an interjection that gets translated as an exclamation mark or “lo,” or “behold.” And in our context, it has the feel of dropping an explicative in the middle of the sentence.

Jacob rolls over to Leah.

*Hinneh!*

What a remarkable scene. Imagine the confusion, the heartbreak, the hangover, the dumbfounded-ness, the bewilderment. Seven years of servitude and Jacob gets swindled. He gets the wife that he didn’t want.

But, seriously, how does Jacob make love to Leah without realizing it’s not Rachel? He’d been pining for her for seven years....  
How’d that work?

Here’s where it takes a karmic turn.

Jacob, who deceived his father under the darkness of bad eyesight, is deceived by his uncle under the darkness of night. Laban’s defense is that this is our custom: the older daughter is married first. Jacob should have known that....

And that should’ve pierced Jacob’s soul; for he used food, disguise, and deception to put himself before his older brother. It would seem that what goes around comes around....

Laban suggests that after the newlyweds complete their week-long honeymoon then Jacob can marry Rachel. “Do another seven years and all y’all will live happily ever after.” There’s no mention of what Leah or Rachel thought of the whole arrangement.

Dear friends, what are we to make of this story? How does this tale of the sister-wives have anything to do with the living of these days?

There are respected theologians who read it as a morality story about meaning and longing in marriage. For example, Tim Keller writes:

*If you get married, if you have families, if you go into the ministry, and say that “finally this is going to fix my life” – those things will never do what you think they will do. In the morning, it is always Leah. If you get married, and in any way do as Jacob does and put that kind of weight on the person you’re marrying, you are going to crush him or her. You are going to kill each other. You’re going to think you’ve gone to bed with Rachel, but you get up and it is Leah. As time goes on, eventually you are going to know that this is the case; that everything disappoints, that there is cosmic disappointment and disillusionment in everything....*

Again, seriously?

This is a story about the weight of life’s expectations?

Leah is forever the image of disappointment?

There must be more to the story.

As it turns out Leah and Rachel don’t get along very well. They squabble, bicker and there are fertility issues. Jacob seems to overcome his disappointment with Leah and she gives birth to a bunch of boys. Rachel enlists her servant to sleep with Jacob to give her a couple boys. Not to be out done, Leah does the same and her servant gives birth to a more boys.....

Until finally,

*...God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, “God has taken away my disgrace.” She named him Joseph.*

This story would make for a great trashy miniseries.

There’s conniving, jealousy, and lots of sex. There’s a romantic undercurrent that’s buried by deception, deceit, and family dysfunction. There are generational issues, extended family issues, and you end up with a bunch of half-brothers from four different mothers – who are eventually only unified by their dislike for Joseph. They might be the 12 tribes of Israel but it's hard to make this blended family fit the sanitized versions we propagate in Vacation Bible School and children’s Bibles....

Maybe this story reminds us again that God works out his covenant with broken, fatally flawed and fully human people, like you and me. And that in fact, while you need an Excel spread sheet to keep it all straight, the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, runs right through Leah. For Leah is the mother of Judah who continues the covenant promise that reaches to David and Jesus and to me and you. The wife that no one wanted is wanted by God to fulfill his will in this world.

Scott Hoezee puts it this way:

*The Bible is less often a book filled with characters whose lives and morality we are supposed to imitate and is more often a book that is like a mirror held up in front of our*

*own flawed selves so that we can see ourselves in these stories and wonder anew at the grace God gives us despite it all.*

I don't know your family issues, but every family has them. My guess is there's a mix of love and hurt, promise and disappointment. My guess is there's old conflicts and maybe even some current struggles. That's the way it is with families – even families chosen by God in Genesis....

Therefore, don't let your hearts be troubled, neither be afraid. The hope of scripture is not in our goodness or our family's function but in the God who keeps covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Leah.

God is continuing to work out his will through doubters, deceivers, and double-crossers like you and me.

The grace of the gospel is that God has not abandoned his people or his promises. You are loved and accepted by God in Christ.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen.