

July 26, 2020
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Genesis 29:1, 10-12, 15-20
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Messy Life

Genesis 29:1, 10-12, 15-20 New Revised Standard Version

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east.

Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

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.

We have been looking at the story of Jacob in Genesis. Last week Jacob was on the run from his brother Esau who he manipulated and tricked. Not only did Jacob get Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew, but with help from his mother Rebekah, Jacob tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing reserved for the firstborn son. After all of this deception, Jacob won't return to his home again for twenty years.

Jacob is now in Haran and he is looking to create his own family. Jacob meets Rachel who keeps sheep for her father, Laban. Laban is Jacob's uncle, his mother Rebekah's brother. Jacob and Rachel meet at the watering well. The stone covering the well is so large that only when all shepherds using the well are present can they remove it. That way there is fair community access to the water. Jacob doesn't want to wait, and in his impatience he rolls the stone away so Rachel can water her flock. That act shows that Jacob is strong, but it also shows that Jacob violates community customs. Jacob kisses Rachel and it makes him weep!

Laban welcomes Jacob and it seems like Jacob's painful past of deception and manipulation is forgotten. Jacob stays with Laban's family and he starts helping out. Laban asks Jacob how he can pay him for his service and Jacob loves Rachel and asks that she become his wife as payment. Laban loves this idea and plans that after seven years of Jacob working for him, Jacob can marry Rachel. This time just flies by because Jacob loves Rachel so much. We have no idea if Rachel had any interest in Jacob at all.

Jacob meets his trickster match in Laban because after 7 years it is time to marry Rachel and Laban brings Leah instead. Now, Jacob doesn't realize that there has been this sister switch-a-roo until the next morning. Was the wedding veil really thick and Jacob couldn't see through it or was the wedding celebration a party and the drink overflowing? We don't know. Laban says that in one week Jacob can marry Rachel too, but Jacob has to work for Laban for 7 more years. Jacob gets married to two different women in one week!

Rachel and Leah's lives are arranged for them. They don't have a voice and their future is full of pain. We don't hear their side of the story. We hear how Rachel and Leah look, but we don't get to hear their thoughts about anything. For many people, when they read this story of Rachel and Leah it elicits trauma and PTSD. Did Rachel and Leah imagine their lives together as sister wives, forced into competition with one another? Did Leah have any choice in being the object of Laban's trick? Why couldn't Laban have been honest with Jacob?

There are two other women mentioned if you read the entire story in Genesis 29, Zilpah and Bilhah. We don't know Zilpah and Bilhah's story. We don't hear whether their side of the

story was different. They are Leah and Rachel's maids, servants, slaves. We don't hear how they came to be slaves and concubines in this household. We don't know who they love or what gives them joy. They don't have a voice in this story, but they are both given to Jacob to have a child. Leah and Rachel do to Zilpah and Bilhah exactly what Sarah did to Hagar. Leah and Rachel are property to their father and then their husband. They perpetuate the exploitation that they suffered themselves.

This story shows us the imbalance of power between humans through slavery, marriage, sex, and family. There is competition between women and pain around infertility. There is ownership in marriage and we don't see any empathy in any of these people. Jacob doesn't seem sorry for hurting his brother Esau. Jacob is only focused on his own desires and has no awareness that his actions might hurt the women he marries. We see that Jacob never deals with his own pain from his family and that continues as he marries and causes pain to others.

We don't know if Laban talks to his daughters beforehand. Is he as deceptive with them as he was to Jacob? Jacob and Laban run from vulnerability and honesty. I wonder if Jacob had been able to see his brother Esau's pain, would he have been able to see the pain of Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah? It doesn't seem like Jacob has any self-awareness. When someone is hurtful to me or I see someone doing something hurtful to others, I wonder about their self-awareness. Are they able to see the hurt and pain that they are causing?

Sheryl Sandberg is the COO of Facebook whose husband tragically died at the age of 47 while they were on vacation. Her world changed suddenly and she struggled to take care of herself and her children in the midst of so much grief. After her husband's death, people didn't know how to talk to her. Friends were uncomfortable with her pain so they would ignore her. You know, when your friend has lost their job, but you don't know what to say so you ignore it. We think that we are being kind because we don't want to remind people of their pain. We don't want to upset them, but Sheryl Sandberg says that what she needed most after her husband's death was for people to acknowledge what she was going through. She needed people to sit with her and to sit with her pain. She needed people to be real.

Imagine not hiding your pain, not trying to escape it. Sitting with it, acknowledging it, and sharing it with others. I wonder if one of the most radical and Christian ways of being is to just be real with each other? To be willing to feel someone's pain, to see someone as a human worthy of love and respect? To not have to compare yourself with that person but just accompany them in their journey, learning from their story, and being a step on the journey toward healing.

That's what I love most about Jesus. When Jesus was with people, he knew who was suffering. He would listen to their story and not turn away. If there were people who needed to change, Jesus was pushing them and not giving up on them. Jesus could sit with people's pain. That's what we are called to do, to connect with people in their messiness and in their pain. We need to be real, to be honest about what we are going through. To look people in the eyes and hear their story and feel their pain. That's what church can be, a space where people can be honest about what they're experiencing in their life, a space where relationships can be built, where we can sit with each other's pain and be real together.

It is hard right now. The world feels overwhelming and uncertain. There is so much pain and God is calling us to be real, to be honest, to not run from our pain. Through it all, there is goodness. Goodness comes in and through the messiness. Jacob and his family are really messy yet God works through the confusion of Jacob and his family to bring about the birth of the Israelite people and the twelve tribes of Israel.

So often when we read stories in the Bible, we lift them out of their context from ancient time and set them back down as if they are to mean the exact same thing today as they did back then. We set them down as hard as a rock. Scripture is not meant to be used as stones to be thrown at women and men, beating them down and robbing them of their futures and their possibilities for living as free, whole children of God. The words of scripture are supposed to be food for the journey of faith. Bread not stone. God cares for Leah and Rachel. “When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved” and “Leah responded, ‘The Lord has seen my affliction’” (Genesis 29:31, 32). “Then God remembered Rachel” and “Rachel responded, ‘God has taken away my reproach’” (Genesis 30:22–24).

Those verses don’t erase that Rachel and Leah have little agency or power in their lives. Those verses don’t erase the fact that Leah and Rachel exploit Zilpah and Bilhah. This is a messy story about questionable biblical family values, but God is persistent in noticing those who are never noticed. God loves those who don’t feel loved. God is continuing moving in the lives of people, even through those who have tainted motives. God doesn’t give up on us, not in our past and not in our present. Thanks be to God, Amen.