

"Sisters"

Genesis 29:15-28

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For thousands of years, people of faith have heard this story. They have heard it because it told them something about who they were. The Israelites of ancient days heard the story of their forefather and mothers and how their story as a nation began. It told them they were the children of Jacob, and that God led them through good times and bad. What does it say to us? Our story today begins when Jacob runs away from home. He has to run away because he has stolen the blessing that his father intended to give to his brother Esau by impersonating Esau in front of their nearly blind father. Of course, when Esau hears about this, he is furious. Mad enough to kill perhaps. So, Rebekah, the boy's mother, but who has always favored Jacob, arranges for him to run away back to where she grew up in Haran, to her brother Laban. Jacob sets off on his own, but on the way has a dream from God that God will be with him and will eventually bring him back to the promised Land. But when he gets to Haran, that's when things really change for him. Because that's when he sees Rachel. It's love at first sight. He can think of nothing and no one else. Then he discovers that Rachel is Laban's daughter. Perfect, he thinks. He's going to be staying with Laban and so he'll see Rachel every day! So he lives with his uncle Laban and his family. Now Laban has two daughters, Leah the oldest, and Rachel. That's where we pick up the scripture lesson for today:

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. ²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²²So Laban gathered

together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But 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.) ²⁵When 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?” ²⁶Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

So the deceiver gets deceived. Deception, as we will keep discovering, is something of a family problem. Then Laban comes up with another deal. He told Jacob to take a week of honeymoon with Leah and at the end of that time he'll let him marry Rachel . . . if he'll work another seven years on the ranch. So then Jacob married Rachel also. But according to the text, he always loved her more than Leah. Now I have to admit that I feel bad for Leah. But I also feel bad for Rachel, having to give up her place to her sister. Why couldn't Jacob have loved them both? Did Leah love Jacob? Did Rachel? Now you may think that this is a crazy story, how could a groom not recognize his bride on their wedding night. Lots has been written about how much wine traditionally was drunk at these wedding feast and that the bride often was veiled and so on. But I think that all misses the point of the story.

I was at a wedding not too long ago and it was a ceremony that was more “traditional” than ones that I would do. And I noticed that the vows that the bride and groom took were different from one another. The groom took a vow to “love, honor and cherish” his wife. But she took a vow to “respect and honor” her husband. At least she didn't promise to “obey” him, I thought, but I thought it was strange that she never made a promise to love him. But I figured that the vows probably came from Paul's admonitions in the Letter to the Ephesians where Paul tells husbands to love their wives and tells wives to respect their husband, but they are never told to love their husbands. But then I read this story and it made me wonder again. In this story, we are told that

Jacob loved Rachel. I mean, he was really in love with her. In love with her so much that he was willing to work without wages for her father Laban, for seven years. But did you notice that we are never told how Rachel feels. Does she love him? What about Leah? What about the substitute bride? Was she in love with Jacob? Or do both sisters just do as their father says? Does it matter how they feel? One thing that this story shows us is the place of women in that society. Notice that Rachel and Leah, as central as they are to our story, never speak. They seem to be just pawns in this power play between Jacob and Laban. They are part of the trick wherein the trickster gets what is coming to him for cheating his brother. But what would this story have to tell us? None of us has more than one spouse at a time. None of us had marriages arranged by our parents, that I know of anyway. None of our marriages are the results of a financial deal made by our fathers.

We read this story with modern eyes and it surprises us and we read it with a sort of wry smile. Who would really do this? Who would fall in love with his cousin in the first place? Who would agree to work for seven years without pay for his bride? Who would be so out of it after the wedding ceremony that you wouldn't recognize your spouse on your wedding night? It's a pretty crazy story, right? Or is it really? The more I read this story, the more it does feel to me like our story. A story not about ancient times, but about us. Because it's a love story, isn't it? And I think this story about sisters, tells us something about how love is supposed to work.

Craig Barnes, the president of Princeton Seminary once mentioned that whenever he does a wedding, he notices something that I notice too. I've done about 300 weddings, I think, and in most of them, the bride and groom decide not to see each other on their wedding day until they meet at the head of the aisle at the beginning of the ceremony. When the bride walks up the aisle and stands next to the groom, they always do the same thing. They sneak a quick look into each

other's eyes. ¹Maybe that's because they know about this story, and they are checking just to make sure this is the right person. But when they do that, I always wonder about that moment that is still to come not long after the wedding. That time, they will take a much harder look into each other's eyes and wake up to the realization that this is not exactly the person they thought. Every time I do premarital counseling, I tell the couple that a day will come when they wake up some morning and look over at the person next to them and say, "You're not the person I married." And they will be right. Right because we all grow and change during our lives, but right also because of this story, because in a way each of us is Rachel and Leah. You fall in love with someone, like Jacob fell in love with Rachel, but you not only get Rachel, but you get Leah as well. You get those things you didn't expect. You get those parts of your spouse that you ignored when you looked through the rose-colored glasses of being in love.

Whether you are married or not is beside the point. This is actually a story about love, and the chances are good that either you have been in love or are in love or will be. Whomever you love, this is really a story about your relationships. Maybe the two women are really just the same person, the person we love. Whomever it is that you love, that person is both Leah and Rachel. You may love one more than the other, but they are wrapped into the same person. Rachel is the one you're head over heels in love with, and you're sure that she will be the blessing to your life. But you can't have Rachel without taking Leah, whom you don't particularly care for and you didn't think you were getting. Because not long after you are together, you discover you didn't get just Rachel. You're also very involved with Leah, and you can work for years trying to turn her into Rachel.

1 Barnes, Craig. *The Problem with Two Spouses*. Day 1. July 27, 2008.

I find that when people fall in love, they are certain that they are in love with Rachel or the preferred image. Oh, they notice these little flaws in the other person, but at first they are blind to the power of those flaws. In fact, they don't even think of them as flaws, but as precious little quirks that make the person more colorful. "Well, he's a little sloppy, but it's good not to be uptight about looks . . . Well, she does seem awfully dependent on her father, but I'm sure that will all turn my way in time . . . Well, he has a little bit of a temper, but I could use more passion in my life." That's often the very thing that causes problems in their relationship in later years.²

I know when I meet with couples, I have them think about what is it that they don't really like about their partner. What is that little bit that really annoys you? Then think to yourself, what if it is always this way? What if he is always sloppy? What if she is always dependent? It's very dangerous to go into a relationship, let alone a marriage, thinking to yourself, "Oh I can always change him. Oh she will change for me." But what if they don't? Is that ok? Can you live with that? Because you may have to. You may have to love him anyway. You may have to love her anyway.

Falling in love is not a matter of the will. It is something that just happens to you. You don't choose to fall in love. But staying in love is about the choices we make. We choose to stay. We choose to work with that person. We choose to live our lives with him or her. Jacob fell in love with Rachel. But he had to choose to love both Rachel and Leah, both the one he fell in love with and the one that came with the bargain. We love the one we fell in love with and the one that really is there day to day. We love anyway.

The Bible calls us to love even our enemies. So the chances are good that God also expects you to truly love Leah, or the parent who was too hurt to love you well, the friend who wasn't there

² Barnes, Craig. *The Problems with Two Spouses*. Day 1, July 27, 2008.

for you in a time of need, or the colleague who betrayed you at work. Those relationships didn't start bad. But somewhere along the way you discovered this person is not who you thought he or she was. The people who were supposed to love you hurt you. When we are hurt, the temptation is great to put as much distance between them and us as possible. But Jesus is persistent in calling you to return the hurt with love. I'm sure that as we watched the events in Charlottesville yesterday, that's how we felt. I can find it in my heart to love those I disagree with about theological or social issues, but a white supremacist who promotes violence? I'm supposed to love that person? Sometimes it seems like there is no human way you are going to be able to do that. And that is exactly the right starting point. There is no human way to love this person. You will have to turn to something sacred. You have to turn to God.

Because that is exactly the way God loves us. And that's how we are supposed to love each other. Even here in the church. There are people here that are Rachel to us. They are easy to be around. They are helpful, encouraging, generous. And there are people that just rub us the wrong way. We can avoid them most of the time, but occasionally we have to grit our teeth and put up with them. They come with the package. That's part of being in the church, part of being in the body of Christ. We get Rachel and Leah both. And we are to love both. We don't have to be in love all the time, but we do have to act lovingly to one another. That's the command: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. That's what Jesus tells us. To love them anyway.

I like to think that although Jacob fell in love with Rachel, that in the end, he loved them both. I hope we love the one we fell in love with and we love all that comes with them. Leah and Jacob had six sons together and one daughter. Rachel had no children for a long time and then gave birth to Joseph. Then a few years later she died giving birth to Benjamin on their way back to

the promised land. Jacob buried her out there alone. Eventually when Jacob died, he was buried next to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah . . . and Leah. Together. I hope an act of love.