

When We Are Weak; Genesis 29:1-30; Pent 9A/Prop12A
Second Presbyterian Church
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July 30, 2023

29 Jacob got to his feet and set out for the land of the easterners. ² He saw a well in the field in front of him, near which three flocks of sheep were lying down. That well was their source for water because the flocks drank from that well. A huge stone covered the well's opening. ³ When all of the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the well's opening, water the sheep, and return the stone to its place at the well's opening. ⁴ Jacob said to them, "Where are you from, my brothers?"

They said, "We're from Haran."

⁵ Then he said to them, "Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?"

They said, "We know him."

⁶ He said to them, "Is he well?"

They said, "He's fine. In fact, this is his daughter Rachel now, coming with the flock."

⁷ He said to them, "It's now only the middle of the day. It's not time yet to gather the animals. Water the flock, and then go, put them out to pasture."

⁸ They said to him, "We can't until all the herds are gathered, and then we roll the stone away from the well's opening and water the flock."

⁹ While he was still talking to them, Rachel came with her father's flock since she was its shepherd. ¹⁰ When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his uncle, and the flock of Laban, Jacob came up, rolled the stone from the well's opening, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban. ¹¹ Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. ¹² Jacob told Rachel that he was related to her father and that he was Rebekah's son. She then ran to tell her father. ¹³ When Laban heard about Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him. Laban embraced him, kissed him, and invited him into his house, where Jacob recounted to Laban everything that had happened. ¹⁴ Laban said to him, "Yes, you are my flesh and blood."

After Jacob had stayed with Laban for a month, ¹⁵ Laban said to Jacob, "You shouldn't have to work for free just because you are my relative. Tell me what you would like to be paid."

¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters: the older was named Leah and the younger Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah had delicate eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and was good-looking. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel and said, "I will work for you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter."

¹⁹ Laban said, "I'd rather give her to you than to another man. Stay with me."

²⁰ Jacob worked for Rachel for seven years, but it seemed like a few days because he loved her. ²¹ Jacob said to Laban, “The time has come. Give me my wife so that I may sleep with her.” ²² So Laban invited all the people of that place and prepared a banquet. ²³ However, in the evening, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he slept with her. ²⁴ Laban had given his servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her servant. ²⁵ In the morning, there she was—Leah! Jacob said to Laban, “What have you done to me? Didn’t I work for you to have Rachel? Why did you betray me?”

²⁶ Laban said, “Where we live, we don’t give the younger woman before the oldest. ²⁷ Complete the celebratory week with this woman. Then I will give you this other woman too for your work, if you work for me seven more years.” ²⁸ So that is what Jacob did. He completed the celebratory week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ²⁹ Laban had given his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her servant. ³⁰ Jacob slept with Rachel, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He worked for Laban seven more years.

Sermon:

We are weak, but God is strong. God’s strength is made known through our weakness.

Many parts of this story mirror the story of Isaac and Rebekah’s meeting, which we read in worship several Sundays ago. Both stories occurred at a well. Both women were noted as being physically beautiful. And both men, we are told, loved the women. Later we are told that Rachel was considered barren just like Rebekah and Sarah.

However, rather than comparing the stories, we’re going to take this week and next week and focus on the character of Jacob. Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah and grandson of Abraham and Sarah, is a complex character indeed.

When Rebekah, wife of Isaac, was finally able to have children, the text tells us she had two children in her womb representing two nations. The two babies fought so much in her womb, she went to God in prayer. God told her that the two children to be born represented two nations which would struggle against one another in life; and also, God told her the older would serve the younger. This reversal of oldest and youngest goes against everything we know about the culture during this time in history. Normally, the eldest received the family inheritance and the younger siblings were left to fin for themselves. It is a role reversal often found in the Hebrew Bible and carries on to the role reversal of Jesus’ message: blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth, or the last will be first and the first will be last.

Jacob would be born second but he is a trickster and would trick his brother Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of porridge, and with the help of his

mother who the text tells us loves him more than Esau, tricks his blind father into blessing him, the younger child, instead of the older Esau. Because of his conniving nature, Jacob would always have the advantage over his older brother.

Continuing this role reversal, when Jacob goes to look for a wife, he falls in love not with the older daughter, Leah, but the younger daughter Rachel. While Leah has tender and soft eyes, Rachel has a beautiful body and Jacob is so smitten with her romantically he kisses her and weeps aloud.

Rachel's father Laban, who is the brother of Jacob's mother Rebekah, must see Jacob's desire for his daughter. After all, Jacob is still hanging around the family compound and doesn't seem to have any intention of leaving. Laban seems forced to make a deal with him.

I imagine Laban saying, *What do I have to pay you to get you to go away? I'll work seven years for Rachael*, Jacob offers. Now, seven is the Biblical number representing perfection.

After seven years, Jacob goes to Laban demanding Rachel. However, Laban turns the tables on the trickster Jacob and tricks Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah instead. On their wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel. Jacob takes Leah as his wife and doesn't realize his mistake until the morning.

Jacob confronts Laban, *What have you done to me? Didn't I work for you to have Rachel? Why did you betray me?* (v. 25). These are interesting words coming from the master of trickery himself. Perhaps he is getting what he deserves.

Laban does allow Jacob to marry Rachel after the obligatory one week marriage celebration to Leah, but Jacob must work an additional 7 years before he can be freed from his obligation. Fourteen years of hard labor for the privilege of marrying his true love.

From the relationship of Jacob with Leah and Rachel and their two servants, will come the children who will represent the 12 tribes of Israel. It's fascinating story or folklore tale of how the people of Israel came to be the 12 tribes of Israel. One man, 4 women, and 12 sons, plus a daughter we hear little about.

What does this complex and wildly dysfunctional story tell us? Why are we reading it today and what difference does it make?

We often laugh and joke that our families are dysfunctional; in fact, all families seem to be dysfunctional. If that is so, there is no doubt that this Biblical family is dysfunctional and has some highly suspect and rotten characters. First, there's Abraham who tries to pass his wife off as his sister on two occasions, and after waiting 100+ years to have a child with Sarah, tries to sacrifice that only son to God.

Later, Isaac and Rebekah both play favorites with their children, a habit that will certainly cause contention in any family. Isaac loves Esau, while Rebekah loves Jacob. Rebekah even helps Jacob to cheat his father into believing that Jacob

is Esau so Isaac can bless Jacob rather than his older brother. Laban tricks Jacob, who quite frankly probably deserved it; then, Jacob loves Rachel who is barren and doesn't love Leah who has lots of children, sons no doubt. Not only does Jacob love Rachel more, he loves her son Joseph more than all his other children which causes all the other children to be insanely jealous of Joseph.

Why would God use such a cast of motley characters to form a nation from which would come the birth of God's own Son? Why does God choose lowly fisherman, tax collectors, and other sinners to be the disciples of Jesus? Why does God choose us, for that matter?

If we look at the trajectory of the Hebrew Bible, from which we see broken, hurting, and dysfunctional people trying to live their lives as God's chosen people, we know that God works through their dysfunction to make them God's people.

Jacob was clearly a conniving trickster, but he was also a persevering and hardworking man for those things and people that were important to him; he worked 14 years for Rachel. God saw something in Jacob that perhaps we cannot see. Despite his despicability he was chosen by God to be in God's story.

We have also been chosen by God to be in God's story. Despite our faults, doubts, and struggles we have been chosen by God to continue that story, even if we cannot see our part or understand it. How do we know this? The fact that you and I are here today tells me that God is still calling and using.

Are we as much in love with God as Jacob was with Rachel? Some have been working for God a long time. Others are just beginning our 14 years of hard labor. God is using all of us in our brokenness and blessedness to serve God in this world and continue God's story. We are part of the motley crew God continues to choose as partners with God.

In our world of conniving people, broken systems, unfair laws, and injustice unanswered, maybe we need examples of people who are willing to work long, hard hours for the things and people that matter. We need the Jacobs in our lives to keep us motivated and encouraged to keep our heads up and continue our work. After all, it's not our work that changes the world, it is God's work through us that creates change, even if it is only incremental.

Don't worry. Have courage. We are weak, but God is strong. God's strength is made known through our weakness.

In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Jesus the Son, and the Spirit of encouragement and change. Amen.

How long have you been working for what you love despite your failures, struggles, and hopes? How long have you been in the church working for God?

20, 30, 40 years, more? While many have left the church, you have not? You are still here. Why?

Maybe you just found the church. Why are you here? Why are any of us here? Have we fallen in love with God like Jacob fell in love with Rachel?

I'd love to hear your answers.

How many years will we have to work to see justice served and chaos curbed in our world? Do we give up before we see results? Do we get tricked into believing we're done, only to be told the work is far from over and we have to work even harder for longer? Do we continue to persevere for what matters? How long will it take the broken and floundering people of the church to convince the people of the world that we are really about love, healing, and grace instead of judgment, hatred, and bigotry? Do we even have a chance to correct our sins and move in that direction? We've got a lot of work to do indeed.

The mainline churches have been losing membership since the 1960s.

Genesis 29:1-14