

Sermon Proper 12 Year A 2011
Genesis 29:15-28
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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As we journey through the book of Genesis, relationships become complicated. The first human relationships are described in the second creation story, Genesis 2:24. “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife.” It sounded so straightforward in the beginning. But life can quickly become complicated as we know so well. As the book of Genesis unfolds we experience many different patterns of married life.

We have been reading through the book of Genesis this summer, the story of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. We began with the story of Abraham and Sarah and continue with their descendents.

Today we heard the story of Isaac and Rebekah’s son, Jacob as he arrived in Haran fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau whose birthright he had stolen. Jacob the deceiver meets his match in his (mother’s brother), dear uncle Laban. Now here is a man who knows how to negotiate. Jacob has arrived at the well and fallen in love with Rachel, the second born daughter.

Smitten and penniless, Jacob has contracted to work for seven full years in order to marry Rachel. Laban is wily and trickier than Jacob suspected. These qualities seem to be family traits. It seems Jacob in his trickery of Esau by stealing his birthright and blessing was merely a chip off the family block. Now it is Jacob’s turn to be deceived.

After the seven years is up, the weeklong wedding feast begins. And then on the wedding night the unthinkable happened. Laban sent the veiled Leah in to Jacob in place of Rachel. Our narrator notes cleverly, “In the morning it was Leah!” We can only imagine the scene and Jacob’s anger. Laban replies deceptively, “this thing is not done in our country-giving the younger before the firstborn.” What salt in the wound of Jacob’s life. The very thing that Jacob did to Esau has come back to haunt him. Laban will allow Jacob to marry Rachel but he must finish the wedding festivities with Leah and then work another seven years.

Unfortunately, the impact of this is that Jacob’s hatred of himself for the tricks he played on Esau, and towards Laban for his treachery were displaced onto Leah. Their marriage would never produce the happiness or love that Leah longed for. Jacob would never forgive Leah for Laban’s trick.

Their family life would never be happy. Leah though unloved was able to conceive without difficulty. With each child she produced she was hopeful that Jacob’s heart would turn. Four sons were born. But the family life did not improve. Rachel, on the other hand, had difficulty conceiving, a common biblical theme. (She experienced this barrenness as a curse which soured her relationship with Jacob and with God.) Rachel gave her servant Bilhah to her husband in order to have sons through her. And Bilhah bore Jacob two sons. Leah stopped

conceiving and so she gave Jacob to her servant Zilpah who also bore two more sons. The atmosphere in the home must have been tense and competitive. Later, Leah again conceived and gave birth to two more sons and a finally a daughter Dinah. Then at long last Rachel conceived and gave birth to two sons of her own, Joseph and Benjamin.

Through the pain and brokenness of the family's life are born the 12 sons who will go on to be the forbearers of the twelve tribes of Israel. (Rueben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulon born to Leah; Dan and Naphtali born to Bilhah, Gad and Asher born to Zilpah, and finally Joseph and Benjamin born to Rachel.) The twelve tribes have a common father in Jacob, but four mothers.

We would be hard pressed to develop a bumper sticker displaying the family dynamics portrayed by our OT lesson this morning. Let's see, two wives who happen to be sisters plus two maids equal a blended (perhaps that is the correct term) family with thirteen children. Our marriage bumper stickers are much simpler. But the bible is anything but straightforward regarding the institution of marriage.

In fact, by the time today's lessons were being gathered into scripture, the book of Leviticus banned marriages between sisters and the same husband. Already Israel knew that the turmoil and jealousy in such a relationship were not what God desired. The institution of marriage continued to evolve and that evolution continues today. We still have a few cultural and faith groups in various parts of the world who espouse polygamous marriages. And that doesn't even touch on the question of God's hopes and dreams for those who are born with a sexual orientation towards members of their own gender. Almost three thousand years later, marriage continues to demonstrate its resiliency and its adaptability.

The point of this lesson from Genesis is not to spotlight the dysfunction and despair of Jacob's family as moving as that is, but to show God's continuing presence and ability to use even this dysfunctional family for the purpose of furthering his beloved people of Israel. God takes the most unlikely situation and turns it into a cause of blessing. God is able to use the deceitfulness of Laban, the love of Jacob, and the longing of Leah to set the stage for the future deliverance of his people. Moses is a descendant of Jacob and Leah from the house of their son Levi. Still later the greatest king of the Hebrew people, David, will descend from Jacob and Leah through the house of their son Judah. "Only a God whose purpose spans all time can do such deeds." (Achtmeier, *Preaching and Reading the Old Testament Lessons*, p. 180)

Perhaps that is something for us to reflect upon. As we experience all that life can bring our way, the ongoing work of God is still present. God is at work even in our most desperate moments. While we may not be able to discern God's presence, we trust that God is faithful. Even the troubling story of Jacob and his family reminds us that God is working his redemptive purpose out.

That redemptive purpose is seen in today's lessons. The redemptive activity in Genesis leads over many generations to the incarnation of the Son of God. Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God. What some call the reign of God. Matthew is reluctant to use the divine name and so he refers to the kingdom of God as the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom is not some ideal future state or place in the sky; the kingdom was inaugurated by Jesus. The reign of

God is the divine continuation of God's love affair with the people of Israel and indeed all of creation. In the kingdom, God is working to make righteousness and peace prevail. This is what Jesus brought to the world. The kingdom is really a relationship with God through the life of his Son, Jesus. This is the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus offers five parables in our gospel lesson to help us get a sense of the unsurpassable value of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is many splendored and Jesus gives us glimpses in the images he describes.

The first two parables speak of small beginnings with tremendous growth and potential. The tiny mustard seed grows into a large shrub in the first parable. The second uses the image of yeast, microscopic fungi that are able to leaven a whole batch of dough. That is what the kingdom of God is like, it begins small and seemingly insignificantly and over time produces abundantly.

The next two parables turn the prism of the kingdom and allow light to reflect off in other ways. Now we see the incredible value and desirability of the kingdom of God. Indeed it is so valuable that if we truly got a glimpse of its worth we would go to extraordinary lengths to obtain it. We might even sell all that we had in order to obtain the kingdom of God. That is the desirability of the gift that Jesus offers to each of us. The gift of the inbreaking reign of God, the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ, the gift of God at work in our world and in our lives.

God was at work in the lives of Jacob, Leah, Rachel and Laban. Not moving them like chess pieces but over time and throughout time working to bring about the blessing that God had promised to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. The blessing reaffirmed in our psalm as it says, "God has always been mindful of his covenant, the promise he made for a thousand generations: The covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac." That is the promise that God is bringing to fulfillment in the lives of Laban, Jacob, Leah and Rachel. The promise will continue through Jacob's children and their offspring through Moses and David and finally continuing through the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

While the promises continue, their lives were anything but smooth sailing to be sure. Despite Paul's assurance, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God," sometimes the working out of God's providence for good takes quite a bit of time and takes some surprising turns.

Married life today is different that it was in Jacob and Leah and Rachel's day. But no matter the arrangement, there is much that we can share with and learn from one another. This fall, plans are under way for a series on parenting and family life as part of our Christian formation offerings. After that we are looking forward to another series perhaps in the spring that focuses specifically upon marriage today.

God is at work in the world today. God is at work in our lives as well. Close to us, a part of every breath and every step. Life however, will not be without its challenges. But we never go through the challenges alone. God is with us and God loves us, and that knowledge is precious and of infinite value. As Paul assured us, if God is for us, who can be against us? This will sustain us through all that occurs until at last the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven is fully realized.