

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
July 30, 2017

“A Tale of Two Sisters”

“... Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah.”
Genesis 29:30

PRELUDE

Our scripture lesson this morning,
taken from the book of Genesis,
is a rather strange episode
from the life of Jacob.

Jacob ... Son of Isaac and Rebekah,
Esau's younger twin brother.
Jacob's life is hard to condense into
few words.

Let's settle for tumultuous,
and filled with intrigue.

You may recall, when first introduced to Jacob,
he was described as “**a quiet man, living in tents.**”
It is an odd characterization, indeed,
somewhat misleading.

If quiet, it was a quiet that masked
an unsettledness, a restlessness
deeply seeded within.

If quiet, it was not a quiet that
brought Jacob contentment;
possibly it served to camouflage his
ambition, to disguise his desire.

Jacob bought the rights and privileges
assigned by cultural convention
to his older twin, Esau,
who sold his birth rite for a bowl of soup.
Esau - about as sharp as a marble; impulsive,
an easy trick.

Jacob continued to distance himself
from his sibling rival when
he gained the blessing of his father, Isaac,
in a scheme filled with false pretense and lies,
misrepresentation and fraud,
masterminded by his mother,
Rebecca (Genesis 27:5-45)
It was an act that further strained
an already contentious relationship;
it so enraged Esau, that Jacob
was left to fear for his life. And Esau
was left asking a haunting question:
Have you only one blessing, father?
(see Genesis 27:38) – Is a father’s favor
limited only to one?

The volatility festering in this holy family
is extreme, and it is eased only when
quiet Jacob
is sent away.

Jacob is charged to vacate – to seek his future
with Rebecca’s family in another land (Haran).

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This is where we encounter Jacob in today’s lesson.
He has journeyed to the home of his Uncle Laban,
and they are negotiating the terms of understanding
which will account for Jacob living in the land of Laban.

As we heard – Jacob is quite smitten with
Laban’s daughter, Rachel – said to be graceful
and beautiful (Genesis 29:17). So Jacob puts
an offer on the table. **“I’ll be in your service
for seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand.”**
And Laban seemingly accepts the deal.

The seven years pass; they seemed but a few days
for Jacob, so great was his love of Rachel.

So we have wedding plans unfolding. A
celebration and feast. Marriage merrymaking.
And a night for the couple to couple!
Memories that will last a lifetime!
Lots of toasts and libations, no doubt, adding
to the electricity of love in the air!
The deal – seven years in the making –
will be sealed.

But Laban pulls a switcheroo on Jacob,
who apparently is so stoked with excitement,
he doesn't know with whom he has slept
when the-day-after arrives!

Rather than having pillow talk with Rachel,
Jacob's bedtime partner was her sister, Leah.
So quiet Jacob has been bested.
He has a new wife – Leah, but he has not
as wife the love for whom he labored.

That love is available Laban says,
for an additional seven years of service.
And to sweeten the deal, Laban includes
servant help to accompany
Leah and Rachel –
Zilpah with Leah and **Bilhah** with Rachel.

If this seems a rather complicated tale,
it is.
And it gets even more complicated.
A familiar theme resurfaces in Jacob's
family configuration – Leah starts having
children, but Rachel does not.

Rachel, seemingly, is left out;
she is without child, and she

demands of Jacob that he
give her what she desires;
which was upsetting to Jacob (see Genesis 30:2);
Rachel then engineers a child,
submitting Bilhah, her servant,
to serve as a surrogate; and not to be outdone,
Leah then repeats the plan with Zilpah.

So Jacob, a quiet man,
has children running round,
having sired with everyone
but the woman he is
said to have loved.

And if this isn't
tumultuous enough, there is yet another
factor to consider when we read:
**"Jacob loved Rachel more
than Leah"** (Genesis 29:30).
which is not a strategy conducive to
family peace and harmony. For if Rachel
felt left out for lack of a child; Leah was
left out for lack of room in Jacob's heart.

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What are we to make of this?
This is our sacred story, we say.
It is all quite complicated, earthy,
with unexpected twists/turns.
Can we extract any edification
from all the drama?

In the church of my nurture,
the Bible was the curriculum
of primary importance.
The stories were to be savored
and honored for their capacity
to tell us something,

if not about ourselves then about the God
who keeps popping up,
to ensure a good outcome.

For children, it was enough, I guess,
to know the names of the characters,
without going into too much of the
troubling adult detail.
And the detail is there - depending upon
where we focus.

One dimension that struck me was
the rivalry of the two sisters, Leah and Rachel,
that balances in part the rivalry of Jacob and Esau.
Consider a tale of two sisters.

One's beautiful, one's not;
one's favored, the other is not;
one's loved, the other is not;
one's sought, highly prized,
worthy to expend seven years of life to acquire;
the other is a parental problem to be solved,
a pawn to cast off in the fine print of a
contract Jacob didn't bother to read.

In this tale we find heaps of
resentment and disappointment,
pain and sorrow; and when the
adults have done all their
biological proclivities, we have
children who suffer the perfidies
of their parents.

This is the unlikely, exasperating lot
of humanity God works through.
And what is amazing -
God does not forsake.
God remembers the poor creatures of
God's own design.

God draws near, to ensure a future
with an improbable cast,
troubled and restless though they be.

The one (Rachel) thought to be barren conceives,
and brings forth life – the key to sustaining
faith and hope in the future
God desires to unfold
(see Genesis 30:22 – “God remembered ...”).

Our service this morning focuses upon
the healing powers of God’s spirit – at work
in us for good, for our health and wholeness,
God’s spirit at work
to restore in us a right sense of self,
to reconcile grievances,
to heal our wounds,
some self-inflicted,
some inflicted by others.
God’s spirit at work to instill within us
the faith, hope, and love we need
for an adventurous journey of life.

A couple of thoughts:
the feeling(s) we possess of being helpless;
on our own, left behind; subject to whim(s)
beyond our control, the sense being both
estranged and abandoned.
God is not far – but near – to equip us, to
guard, guide, and defend us – when the
perils of life are great.

We need be careful in this strange age,
on guard let me say, to avoid the noxious
air of misplaced responsibility.

The airwaves are full of “**manufactured resentment**”
(S. Thistlethwaite; “Manufacturing Resentment:
Trump Targets Transgender Americans in
Military,” *Huffington Post*, July, 2017).

Manufactured resentment lays blame and shame
upon people who bear no fault for merely being
themselves. We need to work hard at avoiding the hate
and bitterness, the crude and coarse and vulgar
behavior that is weekly displayed and tweeted into lives.

Churches often are culprits, stoking fears, looking out with
mistrust upon a world seen as reckless and damnable.

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George Orwell once wrote, “**To see what is in
front of one’s nose needs a constant struggle.**”

We should not underestimate the challenge we face
as a church. As a mainline, liberal church with a
tradition of thought and action that runs deep in
our culture, but that is threatened by expressions of faith
that fail to uphold the freedoms we hold most dear.

We need to double down our prayers, our discipline,
our devotion to truth, beauty, and mutual respect –
to the Jesus way as best we can as we pray to
understand and follow his lead. We need to encourage
and cultivate faith development – to overcome
what obstacles we face. We need to protect and promote
gospel lavish, inclusive, with love that can embrace
the world with all its wonder and mystery.

From G.B. Shaw’s, *St. Joan*
(after the coronation of Charlie, King Charles):

**CHARLES. Oh, your voices, your voices.
Why don’t the voices come to me?**

I am king, not you.

**JOAN. They do come to you;
but you do not hear them.
You have not sat in the field in the evening
listening for them. When the angelus rings
you cross yourself and have done with it;
but if you prayed from your heart, and listened
to the thrilling of the bells in the air after
they stop ringing, you would hear
the voices as well as I do.**

All of us are eligible.
All are eligible to hear the good word,
the forgiving word, the affirming word,
the encouraging word, the healing word,
the comforting word, the life-sustaining,
hope-restoring word of God that
comes by way of Jesus.

This is what is most radical in our Christian gospel –
it is God’s intent to distribute saving grace and mercy
to any and all in need; it is God’s will that we be informed,
that we defend and protect, that we advance and
promote the love that brings life to the world.

God remembers. God remembers to fashion a
future that will bring about good, for goodness
sake and for the glory of God. Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*