

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, August 6, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 29:15-28

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Jacob Marries Leah & Rachel (Deceit)

[prayer]

Today we return to our summer worship series with the story of Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel. Two weeks ago, we left off with Jacob's flight into the wilderness after stealing his brother Esau's patriarchal blessing. Esau threatens to kill Jacob in retaliation. Fearing for his life, Rebekah and Isaac decide to send him east from Canaan to Paddan Aram, to Rebekah's brother, Laban. They hope that time apart will cool Esau's rage and smooth over the conflict between the brothers. They also hope that Jacob will put this time to good use and find himself a wife among his mother's kin.

This story bears several cultural markers that are foreign to us, maybe even distasteful: Cousin marriage, bride price, polygamy. We can be tempted to dismiss parts of the Bible because the cultural context is so different from our own. But while we acknowledge that these stories are culturally bound, we also believe that Scripture is a form of divine revelation and a living document that still speaks to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what makes Scripture holy – the belief that God can use these ancient words and ancient stories to instruct, correct, and increase our faith today.

After some time in the wilderness, Jacob arrives at a well not far from Haran. There he meets his cousin Rachel, the younger daughter of his uncle Laban. She has come to draw water for her father's sheep. Jacob is immediately smitten; he falls fast, and he falls hard. He shows off for Rachel by rolling the stone away from the well so she and the other shepherds can water their flocks. When Rachel learns that Jacob is her cousin, she runs and tells Laban, who warmly receives Jacob into his household, declaring "You are my flesh and blood" (Gen 29:14).

Laban's declaration foreshadows what is to come. Jacob is Laban's nephew, but soon he will also be his son-in-law – twice over! First cousin marriage is something of a provincial stereotype in our culture, but other cultures consider it ideal and encourage it. Esau chose to marry two Canaanite women outside of his clan, which deeply upset Rebekah and Isaac. But Jacob, who has thus far subverted most of his family's norms, is in this case, at least, toeing the line.

It is good manners to help around the 'farm' (so to speak), so Jacob begins pitching in with the daily chores. After a month, Laban observes that Jacob is not going home anytime soon. So, he decides to draw up a labor contract with his nephew and generously lets Jacob set the price. Jacob is so deeply in love with Rachel that the only compensation he desires is Rachel as his wife. (It should be noted that it is unclear if Rachel reciprocates his feelings.) He calculates that the bride price is worth seven years of labor.

The bride price is a type of dowry, or payment, that is still used today in parts of the world.¹ Laban is not selling Rachel to Jacob; rather, the bride price represents the great debt Jacob will always owe Laban for *letting* Jacob marry his daughter. It is a sign of respect between Jacob and Laban. It is also a form of insurance; if the marriage ends and Laban must take his daughter back into his household, the cost of doing so will have been offset by Jacob's labor. Of course, the bride price raises ethical concerns about treating human beings as property, but at least we understand its legal purpose here.

The two men strike a deal: Jacob will work for Laban for seven years (a number representing completion in the Bible) and then Laban will give Rachel to Jacob as his wife. Technically, they are husband and wife as soon as they are betrothed, but the marriage will not be consummated until seven years have passed.

Jacob's love for Rachel is so intense that those seven years feel like mere days to him. When the contract's term expires, Laban throws a lavish wedding feast. We can imagine the carousing that occurred at this party. It is entirely plausible that Jacob was very drunk when Laban executed his deceit. The bride may also have been veiled (as was the custom), or perhaps it was too dark for the couple to see each other. Whatever the details, Jacob does the deed without confirming his partner's identity. And in the morning, to his dismay, he discovers that he is now

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bride_price

legally wed to Leah, Rachel's older sister – not to his beloved. The narrator's description of Jacob's discovery is comic – Surprise! It's Leah! – but Jacob is not laughing.

I have so many questions at this point in the story. Most of my questions revolve around Leah and Rachel (and their handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah). Did they know Laban was going to trick Jacob? Were they willing participants in his deceit? Or were they forced to play along with Laban's game? Did they have any choice in this matter at all?

Our artist for this week, Hannah Garrity, calls her drawing "Laban's Gift" and wrote this about her process: "I have drawn [Leah, Zilpah, Rachel, and Bilhah] as four faceless women wrapped as a gift that Laban gives to Jacob in exchange for a few years' work...It wouldn't matter who they were, or what they looked like, because [they] were the property of Laban."²

The facelessness of the women in this drawing, and their voicelessness in the story, should trouble us. Yes, this story is told in the context of a patriarchal culture; the narrator is part of that culture and narrates from its perspective. And yes, this story is meant to be ironic. The deceiver (Jacob) has been deceived; the trickster has been tricked. Laban, who knows the deception that Jacob perpetrated on Esau and Isaac, decides to teach his nephew a lesson. He tells Jacob, "Where we live, we don't give the younger woman before the oldest" (v. 26). Which is to say, *Birth order is a matter of family honor here, and you need to learn to respect that*. Laban gives Jacob a taste of his own medicine and he also craftily extracts another seven years of labor from his nephew. As Paul wrote, "Do not be deceived, for God is not mocked; you reap whatever you sow" (Gal 6:7 NRSVUE).

We reap what we sow. This is true. But what is also true is that so often others reap what we sow, too. Jacob and Laban, Rebekah and Isaac, Abraham and Sarah – they all share an unfortunate family trait: A tendency toward deceit. And the thing about deceit is that we cannot always control its outcome. A lie is like a stone tossed into a pond – it creates ripples, and once that energy is unleashed, we cannot stop it. The women in this story are the collateral damage of Jacob's

² Artist's statement for "Laban's Gift" by Hannah Garrity. Ink on paper. Inspired by Genesis 29:15-28. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

deceit. He deceived himself into thinking his deceit was righteous, fulfilling divine prophecy, and the only people he was hurting was his immediate family. But the consequences of his deceit end up extending far beyond his relationship with his brother Esau. Jacob's deceit ultimately breeds Laban's deceit. And as the story goes, Laban's deceit ends up pitting his daughters against each other for the rest of their lives in a struggle for Jacob's affection. Jacob eventually marries Rachel as he intended, but he is also married to Leah, and the narrator is clear that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (v. 30). This rejection causes Leah lifelong grief and drives a jealous wedge between the sisters...and eventually between their children, Jacob's sons. Favoritism and sibling rivalry continue to bear bad fruit in this story.

Like Jacob, our choices and actions can have far-reaching and unintended consequences. It is true that we cannot always foresee those consequences. But Jesus has taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves, which means we are challenged to consider to the best of our knowledge how our choices and actions affect other people – particularly the faceless and voiceless people on the margins of our stories. And after we have done this work of discernment, Jesus then commands us to go a step further; Jesus challenges us to make choices and act in a way that values the well-being of others as much as we value our own. Jacob and Laban's deceit was a product of their selfish ambition, but Jesus directs our ambition to be *selfless*. In all things we must first do no harm.

After Jacob marries Rachel, God sees Leah's rejection and He seeks to console her by giving her children. She hopes they will win her Jacob's love. They do not, but after the birth of her fourth son, Judah, Leah finally chooses God's favor over her husband's. "This time I will praise the LORD," she says (v. 35). Leah learns that while human love is imperfect and unequal, prone to selfish ambition and deceit, God's love is the opposite. Divine love, the love we believe we have received in Jesus Christ, is a love that identifies first with the unloved. When our imperfect love betrays the well-being of our neighbors, God's perfect love stands in the gap. Jesus' outstretched arms on the cross are wide enough to encompass and redeem all the far-reaching effects of our harmful choices and actions.

This does not mean we have been given carte blanche. But it does mean that through Jesus there is good news for both victim and victimizer, deceiver and deceived. God stands in solidarity with the faceless and the voiceless, the

collateral damage of our sin. And God also offers us forgiveness as we confess the ways our sin has multiplied beyond our comprehension. We make this confession every time we come to Christ's table. We cannot spiritually receive this bread and cup without doing this first. Because this is the bread and cup of reconciliation, and reconciliation can only begin by acknowledging our complicity in our neighbor's suffering.

Shortly we will sing the hymn "Faith is Patience in the Night." This was one of the suggested hymns for our Scripture lesson. When Bill and I chose it, I was thinking of Jacob's patience in waiting and working for Rachel. But now I sing the lyrics of this song and I think about Leah. Through the long night of a loveless marriage, she ultimately put her faith in God's lovingkindness – what the Hebrew prophets called *hesed*. It is this loving kindness alone that saves us. It is this loving kindness alone that can turn our hearts in repentance and free us from the damaging cycles of our sin.

Let us prepare our hearts to approach Christ's table.