

Jacob and Laban

With today being Valentine's Day and my having announced a sermon drawn from Genesis on the story of Jacob, you may have expected me to preach about his great love for Rachel and how he was willing to work for his father-in-law, Laban, for 14 years for the privilege of marrying Rachel. I did that several years ago, but I'm afraid I may disappoint you today. Just as our society has romanticized the story of St. Valentine, we have also often romanticized the story of Jacob and Rachel. As you may have gathered from the verses I read just now, I want to talk this morning about what happens after the romance, for Valentine, for Jacob and Rachel and their family, for us in relationship with our families. But I also want to talk about love. Not eros, the romantic love, or even phileo, the brotherly love that happens inside of families, but agape, the love of God for us and the standard of love we are called to through Christ Jesus. It's not all candy hearts and flowers, but the kind of love I want to hold up this morning is far more satisfying and long lasting. Candy and flowers might last a week, but God's love for us is for eternity.

But let's start with our societal myth and then move on to, or rather, back to the story of Jacob's family. Valentine of Rome, the man that is being celebrated worldwide today, was not a great lover but, we think, a humble priest. We don't really know for sure as there are no reliable sources about St. Valentine and he has been identified with two different men. One of the legends is that he helped persecuted Christians escape Rome and performed Christian marriages for young people who were fleeing. For these crimes, he was imprisoned. Another legend says that, while imprisoned, he befriended his jailer's blind daughter and healed her. On the day he was led to execution, he left her a note, which she could now read, signed, "your Valentine." Both of the Valentines whose stories we know were executed by order of Emperor Claudius II – beaten, stoned, and beheaded, apparently. Not the sort of visual that leads one naturally to romance.

But then, torrid love stories, whether begun on Valentine's Day or not, often end in suffering. This is true even, or perhaps, especially, in the Bible. Oh, there are some "happily ever after" Biblical romances. The story of Ruth is one, and perhaps the Book of Esther, depending on how you feel about harems. The lovers in the Song of Songs seem to come out OK after some adversity and if one includes the Deuterocanonical books, there's always the Book of Tobit, with young Tobias and Sarah. But, by and large, Old Testament families are quite dysfunctional and none more so than the founding family of the Arab-Israeli world, the generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Abraham, as I mentioned last week, twice tried to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister, a trick his son, Isaac, also tried to pull with his wife, Rebekah. Abraham had problems with his nephew, Lot, and Lot had a dysfunctional relationship with his daughters. Abraham ejected one son, Ishmael, into the desert with his mother, Hagar, then nearly sacrificed the other son, Isaac. Isaac had an otherwise relatively peaceful life but had issues with his two sons and his wife. The younger son, Jacob, had a rocky relationship with his brother, Esau, bargaining for his birthright as the oldest son, then, encouraged and abetted by his mother, stealing the blessing meant for Esau from the now-blind Isaac. After that, Jacob was advised by Rebekah to get out of town to let his father and brother cool off and, oh, by the way, to go to his Uncle Laban's house and find himself a wife – Esau had married a couple of local girls and Rebekah didn't like them.

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And so, you may recall, Jacob traveled back to Haran, from whence Abraham had set out two generations previous, where he met and fell madly in love with Rachel. Like a good girl, she took him home to meet her dad, Rebekah's brother Laban, who immediately took to the young man. "Laban said to him, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh!'" The family resemblance is more than skin-deep, or as our American Baptist brother Rev. Dr. Miguel de la Torre writes, they are "cut from the same cloth." As Jacob has already proven, as Rebekah has also already proven, Laban is a trickster from a family of tricksters. As John Goldingay writes, "(Jacob) now discovers that trickery is built into the family's genes." And that's where the love story begins to get complicated. After Jacob has worked seven years for the privilege of marrying Rachel – in lieu of the camel loads of gifts that Abraham sent for Isaac's bride, Rebekah – Laban tricks him into marrying the wrong sister, Leah, then extracts a promise from Jacob for another seven years of labor for Rachel.

When the fourteen years are accomplished, Jacob is in a difficult position. He wants to go home with his wives and his children, but he doesn't want to go back empty-handed. He wants to make sure he has a livelihood in flocks when he returns, in case he is prevented from claiming the inheritance his trickery won him or, more likely, if he's already anticipating paying off his brother, Esau. As Laban's nephew and son-in-law, he won't inherit when Laban dies; that will be the legacy for Laban's sons. So, he negotiates a new "wage" with Laban. Since his skill with the flocks and Yahweh's favor to him has increased Laban's flocks, Jacob bargains for some of the increase, a "profit-sharing," we'd call it. In general, the sheep of this time and place were white; the goats, black or brown. Jacob strikes a deal for the black sheep (appropriately) and for the speckled or striped of both herds, generally a small minority in both flocks. Laban agrees, and the chicanery begins.

Laban, not wanting his nephew to use his advanced techniques of husbandry to build up flocks for himself, immediately pulls all the multi-colored sheep and goats from the flocks that Jacob is tending and sends them to the flocks his sons are tending, some miles away. In response, Jacob uses a technique he knows to cause the stronger animals in his remaining flock to produce multi-colored offspring, while the weaker animals are allowed to breed single-color kids and lambs. Whether it is Jacob's pre-Mendel selective breeding or the will of God, in six years Jacob has built a big enough flock to attract the ill-will of his brothers-in-law.

Jacob, having lived in fear of his own brother for twenty years, is quick to notice the dark looks he is getting from Laban's sons and possibly from Laban himself. So, when he hears from God in a dream that it is time to go home, he starts making preparation. First, as every wise husband would do, he gets buy-in for his plan from Leah and Rachel. They, like shrewd wives, see that their future is with Jacob, not Laban. Preparations are made and the family of Jacob sets off, but not before Rachel steals her father's idols. Her motives for this are unclear. We should remember that Leah and Rachel were not raised to follow the God of Abraham. Rachel may want the household gods to assure their safe travels. Or she may be figuratively sticking a finger in the eye of the father who delayed her happiness with Jacob and saddled her forever with her sister. At any rate, the theft is done.

In the reading, you heard that Laban felt deceived by Joseph and, as you can imagine, outraged by the theft of his idols. He gathered his men and set off in chase. After a week, he caught up.

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Rather than reading the rest of the chapter, I'll summarize. Jacob argues with Laban, correctly, that he's only taking what is his and that he was afraid Laban would prevent his leaving with his wives and children. The theft, which he knows nothing about, he denies. "Search my tents," he tells Laban, "and the one with whom you find the gods will die." He doesn't know that he is putting his beloved Rachel in jeopardy. But Rachel has learned a thing or two from her father, her Aunt Rebekah, and her husband. She hides the idols beneath a camel's saddle, then sits on it. When her father enters her tents, she says, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." In other words, it's that time of the month and she is "unclean." Laban, sensitive to his culture's traditions, does not approach her and the ruse is successful. Laban and Jacob enter into covenant with one another to stay out of each other's territories henceforth. What began as a family reunion, twenty years before, ends with a contractual truce.

We spend a good deal of time in our culture, and in our church, celebrating families and that is right and proper. Loving families, in proper relationship, are a strength in our lives. But if we are honest, we know that families can also cause great pain and struggle. Sometimes, as we sang earlier, "love is torn and trust betrayed." Nobody knows how to hurt us like our families. Police officers dread being called in to "domestic disputes." No other sort of police duty is as potentially deadly as a quarrel between family members, when even a well-meaning, well-trained intercessor can quickly become the object of ire and attack from both sides. In my years as a pastor and in my own life, I have certainly experienced the panoply of family strife. Husbands versus wives, parents versus children, brothers versus sisters – every permutation of intrafamilial conflict you can imagine has played out in my office and in homes. Sometimes, restoration of relationship is made possible. Sometimes, the conflict ends with a contractual truce – divorce, inheritance settlements, or maybe just a simple agreement to avoid certain discussion topics or each other's company.

But if we are subject to these slings and arrows that flesh is heir to, even at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we should not feel that we are thereby specially lessened in the eyes of God. If we review the stories of the Old Testament regarding families, we will quickly find that family difficulties in no way bar us from being a part of God's plan. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel – these are the generations of the family of God's promise. We will hear more about the sons of Jacob next week and, as you may remember, they were no poster boys for "family values." Nevertheless, they are the fathers of the Twelve Tribes, not only the foundation of the Chosen People, but Jesus' model for the Twelve Apostles. Moses had family problems. David's family lurched from crisis to crisis, with often deadly results. The New Testament does not record what punishment the twelve-year old Jesus suffered upon return from Jerusalem, but, really, would you let your adolescent kid talk like that to you after you'd had to search a strange city for him?

The story of Jacob and Laban is marked by a series of contracts. There is the contract for Rachel's hand, in which Laban cheats Jacob. There is the contract for wages which replaces the Rachel contract, which Jacob certainly manipulates to his own advantage, beating out Laban, who had tried to do the same. Finally, they end with the contract to effectively end their relationship. As far as I can tell, the family of Laban never again encounters the House of Israel. It is a sad, if predictable, ending.

But there is good news for us this morning, in addition to the sobering lesson of family strife. We are now part of quite a different family. In no fewer than five of his letters, Paul reminds us that we have been adopted as the children of God. To the Galatians, he wrote: “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” To the Ephesians, Paul wrote: “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.” This is no contract: “you do so, I do so.” It is love freely given and never, under any circumstance, withdrawn. This is the kind of love to which we aspire and to which we are called. As our One Father has loved us, so are we to love our sisters and our brothers, our earthly parents, our husbands and wives. As Jesus gave himself for us, so are we to give ourselves for our family members, our neighbors, our friends, and even our enemies. It seems impossible and yet, as the 60th Anniversary committee reminds us with their choice of a theme, “nothing will be impossible with God.”

I have mentioned that I’ve been drawing sermon topics this year from the book, Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, by Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro. The book is a sort of daily missal for 21st century protestants, a missal being the book which contains the Bible readings specified for mass each day of the year in the Catholic tradition. Each day’s entry in the Claiborne, Hartgrove, Okoro book contains a psalm laid out as a responsive reading, Old and New Testament readings, and notes and quotes related to the date, which I’ve been using, and other prayers and song choices, which so far, I’ve not used.

I found the quote for today to be particularly apt. It is from G.K. Chesterton, the British journalist, literary critic, theologian, novelist, and poet of the early 20th century. Chesterton wrote: “Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.” Now, that’s my idea of a Valentine’s Day sentiment! Our religion should be a love affair with God, our Loving Creator who has entrusted us with the creation and with each other. Our religion should be a love affair with Jesus, the Anointed One, who loved us so much, he was willing to die for us, and who continues to call on us to love each other. Our religion should be a love affair with the Holy Spirit, the person in the Trinity who dwells within us and empowers us to love. Our religion should be a love affair with all those who God puts in our lives so that we may love them. Can you imagine what might happen if all of those who share our religion made it that kind of love affair? Can you imagine what might happen if all those who claim any religious belief made it that kind of love affair? We can make a difference in our world, we can bring the Beloved Community just a little closer to reality, if only we will approach our lives as a love affair. Happy Valentine’s Day, my friends. Let us go forth and love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God and Mother of us all, amen.