

Family Values?
Stewardship Sunday
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Text: Genesis 29-30

[Jacob had just deceived his father in order to steal the blessing which belonged to his brother Esau. He left home in a hurry when he heard that Esau wanted to kill him, and he headed to his uncle Laban's house. When he arrived in the town where Laban lived, Jacob went first to the community well. While he was there he met his cousin Rachel who had brought the family sheep to get water. Jacob identified himself as a relative and was invited to their house to live for a while.

Further explanation given during the reading of the text: Rachel is beautiful and the NRSV says that Leah had "lovely eyes." The Hebrew word there is not clear, but the implication seems to be that she was not as attractive as her sister. In chapter 30, the mandrakes the Reuben finds were a fruit that served as an aphrodisiac.]

Three weeks ago when I preached about reading the Bible, I said that we always need to be asking the question, how is this text the word of the Lord? This story about Rachel and Leah and Jacob isn't so violent or horrifying as some of them are. But it is strange. It sounds like an episode of Big Love. Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel got those 12 sons by impregnating four different women! Two sisters competed to see who could produce the most sons and attract Jacob's love. One of my students said that Rachel had love but wanted children, and Leah had children but wanted love – it's a powerful summary of the text. When the women couldn't have children, they gave their maids to their husbands and claimed their children as their own. These are some of the "family values" we find in the Bible! So if the Bible seems to approve of polygamy, should we go and do likewise? Probably not, since it is illegal! So how is this text the word of the Lord?

One way to handle this story is to ignore the troublesome parts of it. There is so much to say about Jacob. He cheats his brother, he has a dream about God, he has a family, he wrestles with an angel. Jacob has a Big Life to go along with his Big Love. So the lectionary only includes Gen, 29:15-28, where Jacob works for seven years in order to marry Rachel but then gets Leah instead. It avoids the strange details about how Jacob got all those children. The lectionary prefers that preachers talk about Jacob's spiritual development instead because it is more uplifting!

Another strategy for reading the text is to emphasize the simple moral lessons. Polygamy is bad. Deception is bad. Envy is bad. Sibling rivalry is bad. Don't do these bad things.

And the women also seem to be a cautionary tale. Leah is so desperate for her husband's love! She is a prime example of "women who love too much." She needs to get a life and realize that she is a whole person even if she is married to a jerk of a husband who loves her sister more.

And Rachel! She is such a drama queen about this baby-making business! "Give me children or I shall die!" Really, Rachel? Some critics say she needs to get a life and realize that she is a whole person even if she doesn't have children.

Given all these problematic readings of the story, should we just dismiss it? Maybe the story is so dated that it is completely irrelevant to us now.

I suggest that one way try to understand this story is to see it as an example of the enormous cultural differences between the world of Rachel and Leah and our world.

This is a society in which men rule. Jacob loved Rachel and promised to work seven years for her. But did she love him in return? The text never says. No one asked her if she wanted to marry him. And when Laban pulled a fast one and sent Leah into the marriage tent instead of Rachel, he probably did not consult with her first and ask if she wanted to share a husband with her sister. Laban may have felt a little desperate that Leah wasn't attractive enough to find a husband on her own. The maids, Zilpah and Bilhah, were not asked whether they wanted to become surrogate mothers.

But the women are not powerless. Rachel and Leah decide to give their maids to Jacob. Rachel offers Leah a night with Jacob in exchange for some of her son's mandrakes. And the women name their sons. They do not have much power, or much of a voice, but they use what they have.

The wedding customs are very different. A common question about this story is how Jacob could be so clueless that he didn't recognize that he started his honeymoon with the wrong woman!!! "When morning came, it was Leah!" But this honeymoon did not begin in the bridal suite of the local Hilton Hotel, but in a dark tent with a heavily veiled bride. Jacob may have also consumed a lot of alcohol at the wedding feast! One of the ancient Jewish commentaries suggests that Leah and Rachel were actually partners in the deception, and that Rachel was doing the talking while hiding under the bed!

Jacob was furious with his uncle for tricking him, but Laban claimed that it was not customary to marry the younger daughter before the older. The result was that Jacob got to marry Rachel too, but had to work another seven years to pay off his debt. Laban was more interested in Jacob's work than his daughters' happiness.

The story clearly shows the drawbacks of polygamy. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, which is not surprising given that he had not wanted to marry Leah. But polygamy was still a family value in this culture. God had promised that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would have a big family, which would eventually become a great nation. So they wanted lots of children! Especially boys! In a culture based on agriculture and herding, the more kids you had, the more work you could get done. In a culture where warfare was likely to take some of your sons away, you should have as many sons as possible. So it made sense to have multiple wives in order to produce lots of children. Polygamy was not conducive to good marriages, but it was an acceptable way to build a nation.

Another enormous and obvious difference in the biblical culture was the role of women. Some commentators have been very critical of Rachel and Leah. Their desperate longing for love and children signified a lack of faith in God, or a lack of maturity or self-confidence. But Rachel did not long for children because she was an immature, silly woman, but because her culture said she was nothing if she did not bear children. We might dismiss her "Give me children or I shall die" comment as hysterical and manipulative, but to her the lack of children was as bad as death. Leah is often criticized for her desperate yearning for Jacob's love, but she was stuck in a

marriage she did not choose. Who can blame her for wanting some measure of love and respect from Jacob? Rachel and Leah may seem to us to be petty or conniving, but they lived in a culture where their “success” as women depended on their ability to produce sons. We might be tempted to say, “Get a life and stop waiting for love or children.” But that is exactly the point. This was their life. It was a narrow, constricted life that is very different from the choices that many first world women have now.

So after all this, should we just see this story as an interesting artifact in a museum? Or an interesting animal in the zoo? It’s quaint, it’s weird, it tells us something about biblical culture. But it doesn’t have much to do with us. Some quick observations.

1. We should be careful about using the Bible too quickly and easily to promote “family values” in current social and political debates. Some of the values in the Bible are quite different from ours in the 21st century, because the culture was so different.

2. On a more personal level, this story acknowledges the power of longing and yearning. Jacob, Leah and Rachel wanted love, and family and success. We also want love, and relationships, and well-being, and meaningful work. We also want to thrive ... in whatever way we define that. This story doesn’t dismiss those things as foolish or somehow beneath us. It is okay to long for relationships and connections, recognizing that too much longing can sometimes cause us trouble.

3. In the midst of all the pain and loss in this story, Leah especially feels that God is somehow present with her. When Leah has her first son she names him Reuben. God has seen her pain, she says, and given her a son. She names her second son Simeon, which sounds like the Hebrew word *shema*, which means hear. God had heard her pain, she said. And later, God remembered Rachel. We don't need to adopt some kind of mechanistic idea that God intervenes and controls every move we make. But we might ask how God is present in our lives. How does God continue to see and hear our pain and our longings and then bless us with grace and goodness?

4. Finally, this text speaks to the theme of stewardship. These women did not have much money or power. They did not have a high powered career. But having children was a way to give to God, to their family, and to the world. There was not a strong belief in the resurrection in the Old Testament. That's why the Sadducees were so dubious about it in the Gospel lesson. When there is no resurrection, then children are the way that people achieve a kind of immortality. That's why it was so important for Rachel and Leah to have those children.

We probably have more resources and more choices now. But like them, we are called to use what we have. Whatever power we have, whatever voice we have, whatever financial resources we have, how can we use them? For God, for the church, for the kingdom of God?