

August 9, 2020
Faith Rules
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Genesis 29:15-28

Jacob Marries Laban's Daughters

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹ Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵ When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" ²⁶ Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸ Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

God loves us. God has redeemed us from death. God is with us now. Believing that, we have all we need to be okay for as long as this current crisis lasts. Or any crisis, for that matter.

It was March 22nd, the last time I preached to live human beings other than my husband. For 21 weeks I've preached to birds and flowers and dogs and chickens, but mostly to my iPhone. Preaching to people is easier. And faster. I'd go back in a minute if it was necessary for our life together.

But what is necessary is that we testify to the spirit of Jesus, that spirit which is always giving life and nurturing life in a world so terrified and full of death. What's necessary is that we testify to Jesus' life-giving Spirit, even when it's inconvenient; even when it's costly; even when it takes a long, long time. "When is your church going back?" I get asked all the time. *As soon as it's safe*, I say. Twenty-one more weeks? Maybe. A year? Maybe. As soon as being together doesn't put a single one of us or our neighbors at risk of contracting this terrible, incurable disease. "We can't control every risk, you know." True that. But we can control this one.

And doing so, we shall describe as *keeping faith*; as *loving one another and our neighbors as Jesus first loved us*; as *laying down our own wants and wishes for their very lives for as long as need be*. And not stoically either, friends. Not morosely as if we are martyrs spilling blood upon the ground. But cheerfully, with the same good humor we muster for Vacation Bible School. It's hard work, sure. But hard work worth doing, knowing that we gain more than we give, find more than we lose. Amen? Amen.

That said, I want to pray and look at our next Jacob text. As our friend Donna used to say, nothing in a movie, show, or book was ever as funny, sad, terrible, or outrageous as what happens in a real-life family. The story happens in one geographic place – a difficult place for each character, for his or her own reasons. They are stuck; confined, if you will, doing the best they can in a world they cannot control.

Let's pray. *Quarantine, O God, not our favorite. We aren't used to being equalized with every human on the planet. To being so bossed around by a power so unwilling to negotiate. A force that plays by no rules at all. Perhaps, O God, our wants and wishes for ourselves exceed your intentions for our lives. Perhaps contentment is the mark of faith these days. If so, may we consider contentment worthy of our effort. In your name we pray, amen.*

Jacob loved Rachel from the first. So much so, apparently, he wasn't thinking with his brain. Because nobody in his right mind would have agreed to the deal he struck with Uncle Laban – essentially seven years of slave labor, or so he believes, not a clue that Laban has tucked seven more up his sleeve. So for love, off to work Jacob goes, herding sheep. Seven years: 84 months; 364 weeks; 2,555 days. Notice, Laban wasn't counting. But Jacob was.

On Day 2,556: "Uncle Laban; my time is complete. I want to go in to my wife," says the New Revised Standard Version, the only one I can quote with a straight face. It's daylight the morning after before Jacob figures out the prank. It's horrible. Horrible to men imagining Jacob's humiliation. Horrible to woman imagining Leah's degradation – and Rachel's – by their own dad!

Or, it's impossible. It's hyperbole, exaggeration for storytelling effect. And, thus, hilarious. Bawdy. The trickster finally gets tricked. Jacob is furious, "What have you done?" Laban is cool as a cucumber. "This is not done in our country, giving the younger before the firstborn." Oh the irony. Don't you know that always being the smartest guy in the room is as good as it gets, until you aren't?

A prank seven years in the making and Jacob fell for it hook, line, and sinker. If he wants Rachel, he has to take Leah too. He'd never have agreed to it but there ain't nothing he can do about it now. So he has a two-week honeymoon: seven days with Leah, immediately followed by seven days with Rachel. And hi-ho, hi-ho, it's back to work he goes, waking up for the next 2,555 mornings knowing he is the dumbest in all the land.

Throw in two more baby-mamas, Zilpah and Bilhah, and the result is a story of rivalry, envy, and dispute that bleeds into the next generation and even, I would say, into the DNA of Israel herself. Jacob fought with Laban. Leah fought with Rachel. Rachel fought with Jacob. Rachel and Leah fought with their dad. No doubt each of them, in their own minds, believing they were doing the best they could. Laban had no sons and a daughter no one would marry. As awful as his trick was, by it he secured a future for Leah. He made sure she didn't starve once he was gone. Using Rachel for bait, also terrible. I suspect it's partly why she is so ready to abandon him later. But she also lived to hate him. And maybe Laban figured those costs in too – the cost of saving his girls was that they'd hate him for it. Being a parent is really, really hard.

Rachel and Leah had no decisions to make. Their choices were their father's business until it was their husband's. And marriage was business. Daughters were wages, as the text says. Bought and sold like the sheep in Laban's pens. Their agency comes with motherhood and is limited even there. And Jacob. Jacob, Jacob, Jacob – people love to name their son Jacob, but hope he doesn't turn out like this guy.

Do you know the Mark Twain short story "The Million Pound Bank Note"? Two gentlemen in London bet that a poor person with nothing but a banknote worth \$1M will either be rich or in jail within thirty days. So they give it to a sailor and he carries it around, trying to spend it.

That's Jacob in Haran. He has a fortune and a blessing in his pocket he can't cash anywhere but home. It's just 200 miles, here to Chicago, more or less. But he can't go home, remember, or his brother will strangle him on the spot. So he too is stuck. Laban, Rachel, Leah, and Jacob, every one of them is stuck in their own way. Quarantined, if you will, by rules and consequences they can't change. Doesn't matter if they caused it, like Jacob; or not, like Rachel and Leah and Zilpah and Bilhah; or if they manipulated this world's rules and conditions to suit their own needs and ambitions, like Laban. They are all in the same boat now – a boat much too small for this many kids and sheep, this many meals and this much laundry, for so many Zoom meetings and on-line kindergarten classes. So little work; too much work. So much anxiety; so little information. Are you with me? I can't tell if you are with me.

And in the story, nobody much speaks of God. Laban did once, remember? Way back when that servant of Abraham first came to fetch his sister Rebekah, and he saw all that gold they were willing to pay for her. Leah and Rachel do too, when they name their children. And then Jacob does, of course, twice when he dreams at Bethel which we've read already, and again when he wrestles with God on the way home. But that's thirteen years away.

But theophanies and baby days – those are like High Holy Holidays. In Ordinary Time, the time when the days are long and the years are short, God doesn't get mentioned. Ordinary Time is for surviving. In the story, over the next thirteen years of ordinary time, twelve

baby boys and an untold number of baby girls are born into Jacob's household. Only one girl is mentioned by name. Do you remember her name? Dinah. You can read her story in Genesis 34. That story probably explains how Jacob ended up moving his whole tribe to Bethel. Joseph is the next to the last boy. Through him, Israel ends up in Egypt, eventually in slavery there for 400 years, and then exile with Moses.

Over, over and over again, God's people found themselves in a world where they don't get to make the rules. Rules that bear down on them, push them around, quarantine them to certain places and situations, where they are forced to make a life out of the choices they **do** have. And no doubt, often it is a crummy set of choices. According to my missions professor, when times were really hard in his African village, people would joke with each other asking, "Would you rather be eaten by a lion or crushed by an elephant?" The answer: "I'd rather the lion eat the elephant and leave me out of it."

For Laban, the question went like this: "Would you rather let your child starve to death or force her into the wedding tent with a man who doesn't want her?" All of time is like that for some people. Ordinary time has become like that for people like us. The world offers us no good choices. And friends, there's no use pretending that inside a choice like that we are going to find a golden ticket called "God's perfect will for our lives."

God didn't work that way in scripture. I haven't known God to work that way in the lives of saints I've known. In both I see God at work in the midst of the mess, among people doing the best they can in the mess. People who wake up in the daylight and finally realize what a mess this world is. Whether they made the mess themselves – which Jacob did, obviously, whether he wanted to admit it or not – or they were simply born into it, like Rachel and Leah, and also Jacob, weirdly.

Or, if it is some of all of that, like a deadly germ that jumped off a strange little animal onto a human on one side of the world. (The virus didn't buy its own plane ticket.) And because humans do love our technology, and we love crisscrossing this world by the minute, that germ is now in every nook and cranny of human existence, utterly *un*-beholden to our wants and wishes, refusing to play by this world's rules. Those rules which go something like: Life is a game of getting what you want by whatever means necessary. Other people are either assets or liabilities to be used accordingly.

Those were Laban's rules. And Jacob's. And governments'. And businesses'. Of every organization which prioritizes their own survival over the wellbeing of the human beings they supposedly serve. And maybe they have to. But church doesn't. Believers don't – because Jesus is our teacher and example. He prioritized his own survival over no one's. Not even his enemies'. People who were wrong about him.

If the church dies in service to her people, what is more Christlike than that? But if she were to kill, risk and sacrifice their lives out of some misguided fear for her own survival hasn't she just treated human beings as property, like assets or liabilities to be used

accord- ingly? When Jesus saw his own religion doing business like that, he smashed their game tables and drove them from the place. Just sayin'.

So this, friends: there simply is no way to be the church according to this world's rules. The rules of faith are and have always been small, simple, and pretty much impossible to live by. And yet they persist, plain as ever: God loves us. God has redeemed us from death. God is with us.

Just that. All that. And it's enough. God loves us. God has redeemed us from death. God is with us now. Amen. Amen. And amen. Let's pray.