

Genesis 29:15-28 (The Message)

[Jacob has fled north to escape Esau's wrath. He approaches a well and strikes up a conversation. Do they know Laban, Jacob's uncle? They do know Laban and point out that his daughter, Rachel, is also coming to the well.]

While Jacob was in conversation with them, Rachel came up with her father's sheep. She was the shepherd. The moment Jacob spotted Rachel, daughter of Laban his mother's brother, saw her arriving with his uncle Laban's sheep, he went and single-handedly rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the sheep of his uncle Laban. Then he kissed Rachel and broke into tears. He told Rachel that he was related to her father, that he was Rebekah's son. She ran and told her father. When Laban heard the news—Jacob, his sister's son!—he ran out to meet him, embraced and kissed him and brought him home. Jacob told Laban the story of everything that had happened.

Laban said, "You're family! My flesh and blood!"

When Jacob had been with him for a month, Laban said, "Just because you're my nephew, you shouldn't work for me for nothing. Tell me what you want to be paid. What's a fair wage?"

Now Laban had two daughters; Leah was the older and Rachel the younger. Leah had nice eyes, but Rachel was stunningly beautiful. And it was Rachel that Jacob loved.

So Jacob answered, "I will work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

It is far better," said Laban, "that I give her to you than marry her to some outsider. Yes. Stay here with me."

So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. But it only seemed like a few days, he loved her so much.

Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife; I've completed what we agreed I'd do. I'm ready to consummate my marriage." Laban invited everyone around and threw a big feast. At evening, though, he got his daughter Leah and brought her to the marriage bed, and Jacob slept with her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.)

Morning came: There was Leah in the marriage bed!

Jacob confronted Laban, "What have you done to me? Didn't I work all this time for the hand of Rachel? Why did you cheat me?"

"We don't do it that way in our country," said Laban. "We don't marry off the younger daughter before the older. Enjoy your week of honeymoon, and then we'll give you the other one also. But it will cost you another seven years of work."

Jacob agreed. When he'd completed the honeymoon week, Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.

How much do you love your spouse? How much would you sacrifice for her? Fourteen years of life? What is the biggest sacrifice anyone ever made for you?

He meets her. He kisses her. He loves her. Such is the stuff of many a Hollywood hit. . . . Ok, so the kiss is one of those family kisses. Still, it soon becomes clear that Rachel is the girl who claims Jacob's heart. After all, we're told she is stunningly beautiful! All very Hollywood.

But there is a problem. Jacob is a bit short on cash and he knows that Laban is not about to marry off a prize daughter for nothing. So Jacob offers to work for Laban for seven years to earn Rachel as a wife and Laban agrees. We're told that though Jacob labored for seven long years, it seemed to him like only a few days. That's love!!

When the big day came, Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob. On the wedding night, Laban slips Leah, Rachel's older sister, into the wedding tent in Rachel's place and Jacob never notices the switch. All I can figure is that there must have been a lot of veils and a very dark tent!

In any event, in the morning Jacob confronts Laban about the switch. What's been done cannot be undone. A marriage has been consummated and Leah is his wife now, not the beloved Rachel. But Laban still dangles Rachel out in front of Jacob, telling him that for

another seven years of labor Jacob can marry her too. And he does. Jacob works another seven years, making it fourteen years total that he has sacrificed in order to be with Rachel.

Marriage as an aspect of our discipleship

Isaac marries Rebekah. Jacob marries Rachel. Yes, the patriarchs practiced plural marriage, as was common to ancient cultures. Nonetheless, in the biblical view, marriage is a covenant between husband and wife and it is a covenant before God. The UMC affirms “the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman.”

As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to a way of life in which marriage is a covenantal commitment and a witness to others. The writer of Hebrews urges disciples to honor their marriage, mirroring God’s faithfulness in their faithfulness to each other. The apostle Paul urges married disciples in Corinth to stay with unbelieving spouses so that the unbeliever might come to know Christ (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). He further urges husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and to love their wives just as they love themselves (Ephesians 5:25-33).

In a sermon for the wedding of two friends, Richard Hays, an ordained pastor and preeminent NT scholar, wrote:

“Thus, in making the covenant of marriage, you make a covenant to love one another as God has loved you – that means to love one another unconditionally, freely, sacrificially. In making the covenant of marriage, you promise to become servants of one another in love. In making the covenant of marriage, you form a union that reflects the love of God and stands as a *sign* of God’s love in the world. Marriage is a sacrament in the true sense: it is both sign and vehicle of grace.”

The marriage of disciples is not so much about the feelings of love, as wonderful as they may be, marriage is about the *practice* of love. We do not marry to meet our own needs nor to help us be fulfilled. Marriage is two partners, each seeking good for the other, each sacrificing for the other, each living out a deep and abiding covenant that endures the inevitable difficulties. This is God’s hope for us. Philip Yancey writes, “I went into marriage thinking love would hold us together. I learned instead that it required marriage to learn what love means . . . a unity sealed by God.”

Yes, Jacob is finally going to be married to Rachel, but Laban has made complete ruin of it all. Poor Leah was forced into a marriage she didn’t want, knowing that Jacob’s heart belonged to her sister. Rachel endured seven years of watching Leah as Jacob’s wife alone. And Jacob gave fourteen years to the deceiving Laban.

Further, out of all this there must come children, for Jacob is the bearer of the covenant and there must be heirs to the promise if Abraham’s family is ever to be as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5).

Sadly, it is the need for children that gives rise to yet another rivalry. This time it will be sister against sister, as Leah is able to have children but Rachel remains childless. The biblical writer tells us that God saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb.

Leah gives birth to four sons. In her frustration, Rachel sends into Jacob’s bed her maid, a legal surrogate, to bear a child who will be Rachel’s. When Leah proves unable to have more children herself, she also sends in a legal surrogate. It is a bona fide baby-making competition. If you’ve wondered how Jacob could end up with so many sons – here is your answer! It is Jacob’s many sons who will be the patriarchs of Israel’s twelve tribes.

In the end, Rachel herself is finally able to have a baby, a boy, whom she names Joseph. Knowing how much Jacob loved Rachel, we can understand why Joseph becomes his father’s favorite and the envy of his brothers, who resent even a multi-color coat made for Joseph by his father – but more on that story in two weeks.

For now, reflect on Jacob and Rachel. What a love they must have shared. Fourteen years they waited to be married. Though tricked and swindled, they pressed on, determined to be together. Through all the twists and turns, they never lost their love.

This story reminds us that the best synonym for love is sacrifice. Jacob’s love for Rachel goes far beyond mere feelings. He gives up many years of his life for her, for them. In this, Jacob’s love foreshadows the love of Christ, who didn’t just give up fourteen years of life for you and me, he gave up life itself. I think that if Paul ran into Jacob one day and said, “You want to know what love is, look to the cross,” Jacob would know just what Paul was talking about.

Seeing Jacob and Sons in the Larger Story of God's Rescue Plan Part 2 – Abraham's Family

The stories of Abraham & Sarah, and their descendants, consume Genesis 12 forward. Two thousand years or so before Jesus, God chooses a man named Abram to be the one through whom God would restore his people and all creation, to undo the damage wrought by human rebellion in the garden.

God makes three promises to Abram: (1) Abram will be the father of a great nation, (2) God will give them a land (12:7), and (3) through Abram all the "families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The third promise is particularly important in understanding the rest of the Bible. God did not choose Abram and his descendants (who would become the nation of Israel) just for their own sake, but for the sake of the whole world. This notion of God's people being the agents of God's renewal and redemption carries all the way through the Bible. For example, Jesus' commission of his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19) is the natural extension of the charge given to Abram.

The stories of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau and all the rest of the family are real, they are messy, and, frankly, often not very flattering. Abraham and Sarah do not trust God's promises about children; indeed, Sarah laughs at the idea. Sarah is so sure that God won't deliver on his promises that she sends in one of her maid-servants to get pregnant by Abraham and then, when she does, tosses the servant and her child out of the camp. Jacob cheats his brother Esau out of his birthright – at his mother's instigation. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. But . . . through all this, there are a couple of points to keep in mind:

1. These Old Testament "heroes" are often not good role models for us. The Biblical writers don't try to clean up these stories or make the ancient patriarchs of Israel seem larger than life. The writers tell it is it was. There isn't a moral to all these stories. Sometimes, you can't even be sure whether the story is giving us a good example or a bad one!
2. Through all this human ugliness, God's purposes move forward. When Joseph confronts his brothers, he tells them, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20).

Covenants

The notion of covenant is also central to these stories and is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible. They fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans. Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don't trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor. When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God's covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Our story for next week is of the night when Jacob wrestles with God. These readings will take you through that story and Jacob's final confrontation with Esau. Is fourteen years enough time to heal those wounds?

Monday, Genesis 32:1-21 Jacob heads home, preparing to meet Esau. What sort of welcome awaits him?

Tuesday, Genesis 32:22-32 Jacob wrestles with God all night long – literally!

Wednesday, Genesis 33:1-17 Esau welcomes the fearful Jacob with open arms. But the two brothers part ways again.

Thursday, Genesis 33:18 – 35:5 Jacob makes his way to Succoth and Dinah, one of Leah's daughters, is raped.

Friday, Genesis 35:6-29 Rachel dies in childbirth. This last son is Benjamin. Isaac also dies.

Saturday, Genesis 36 This is an overview of the descendants of Esau. Why do you think the Israelites kept these Esau stories and lists in such detail?

Sermon Notes

Growing Up Jesus

A look at the lives, beliefs, and practices of Jews in Jesus' day
A new *Something Else* series that continues today

What was it like to grow up in Jesus' world? Learning to be better readers of the Bible means learning it to read in full, living color. And that means coming to Scripture with a better appreciation of the historical and cultural context. In the case of the gospels, we need a better handle of what it was like to be a Jew in Jesus' day. In this series, we'll look at a full range of questions that swirl around the lives, beliefs, and practices of first-century Jews. You'll be surprised at how much your understanding of the gospels will be deepened. There will be plenty of surprises along the way!

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jacob sacrificed fourteen years for Rachel. Rachel sacrificed fourteen years for Jacob, even enduring his marriage to her sister. What has anyone ever sacrificed for you? You might share some stories of when people who love you have sacrificed for you.
2. How strong a sense do you have Jesus' sacrifice for you? I'm not talking about knowing it in your head, but truly appreciating his sacrifice with your heart. I think that many people have a difficult time really feeling grateful for Jesus' sacrificial faithfulness. I think if we *felt* more appreciation, we'd all be together in worship every week. As Jesus said to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). How can we become more appreciative, really over-the-top grateful, for Jesus' love and sacrifice for us?
3. Jacob loves Rachel! In his commentary on Genesis in *The New Interpreters Bible*, Terence Freithem writes, "Life in God's good creation involves more than divine promises and religious practice; it includes such creational gifts as the love between husband and wife." Love as a creational gift. In what ways does this differ from our society's understanding of love? How do these differences play out in the day-to-day living of a marriage? Of a family? In our friendships?
4. In the Old Testament, understandings of true love are built upon faithfulness and steadfastness. God loves his people; he is faithful and steadfast toward them in all things. This should also characterize our human relationships. Being steadfast and faithful are about the "doing" of love more than the "feeling" of love. God's gift of creational love begins not in romance but in commitment. Isaac married Rebekah and then he loved her. Could it be that the commitment creates the love? Do you think that Jacob's sacrifice and commitment for all those years deepened his love for Rachel? Perhaps this is easiest to see in our families. I can think of a few family members I've had to learn to love.