

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Family Reunion”

July 31, 2011

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Genesis 29: 15-28

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 for another seven years.’²⁸ Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

This week has been a difficult one trying to blend back into the reality of life following around 10 days of vacation. I assume that you’ve been there also! My time away included some wonderful experiences. I worshipped with some dear friends at the First Congregational Church of Salt Lake City. I officiated at the blessings of the marriage vows for Laura’s niece Marcie. I broke bread with good friends and former colleagues. I soaked up the beautiful sights of the Salt Lake Valley and the northern Wasatch mountain range. I closed my vacation by attending the Paul McCartney concert at Comerica Park with my lovely daughter Amelia and Art Hirshfield. It was a memorable show!

There were some other things about my time off that were not quite so pleasant. To begin, our original flight to Salt Lake City was cancelled, shortening our trip by 24 hours. When we traveled up the canyon to visit Park City, I experienced some altitude sickness and was in no mood to enjoy a meal. A couple of days later, while going to dinner with some beloved friends, Laura took ill, we believe from food poisoning. And then we returned to Michigan just in time to rent a U-Haul truck and go to Muncie, Indiana to clean out Maren’s apartment in 98 degree heat and humidity. Ah, the joys of a family vacation!

One of the things that was special about our family vacation was that the wedding gave Laura an opportunity to be with her mother and three sisters, a group normally scattered in five different states across the country. Her oldest sister made each of them t-shirts, with the words “Sister Act” and a picture of a sunglasses wearing nun on the front. Their names were listed on the back and their mother was wearing a shirt that said, “Mother Superior.” Needless to say, the five of them drew some attention as they walked down the street.

Whenever they reunite, Laura and her sisters will occasionally test my patience. There is just way too much energy involved in their meeting for me to relax. They are not like my immediate family. We tend to be rather reserved and hide our affection and our disagreement. Laura and her sisters act like goofy kids, laughing and singing silly songs from their childhood. They quarrel, each having developed strong yet different opinions and beliefs that most of them aren't afraid to share. Yet they always cry at goodbye, no matter what, understanding that they do not know the next time they will meet.

Summer is a season to spend more time with our families. But as one commentator put it, "You don't know whether this is good news or bad news." It is a time of togetherness, when everyone is under the same roof for more hours of the day. It is a time of vacations, when family members with different priorities are forced to co-exist in cars, hotels, canoes, and bathrooms. It is a time of family reunions, when uncles start debating the rules of a game of horseshoes and the aunts argue about the name of the family's first pet. When it comes to our family vacations and reunions, things rarely turn out as we dream them to be. When it comes to our families as a whole, things seldom turn out as we envision them to be.

Perhaps we just expect too much. We hold a rather idealistic 1960's sit-com picture of family in our heads. Everyone gets along and everyone is in general agreement. Problems are solved with a process of loving teamwork. Everyone is always honest and helpful, more concerned about the other than themselves. Hugs and laughter, love and harmony prevail. In families, the reality rarely turns out to be as we plan.

The journal *Campus Life* reports of a small Petaluma California company created by a woman to help clients decorate their homes, balance their checkbooks, run errands, etc. It is called Rent-a-Wife. The founder of the company wants to hire her father to initiate a second business, Rent-a-Husband. Jokingly, she said she also wanted to hire her own husband and two teenagers out as Rent-a-Family. "They can come over to your home, eat all your food, leave things on the counter, turn on all your lights, put handprints on the wall, take showers and leave the towels and dirty laundry on the floor."

In the Scripture lesson this morning, we find part of the story of Jacob. If you were part of our Lenten study back in the month of March this story should be very familiar to you. Jacob had just experienced a dream about angels dancing back and forth between heaven and earth. But the dream didn't mean much to him yet. He had family problems. He had stolen a birthright from his brother. Now he was penniless and on the run from a sibling who he believed was out to get him.

Jacob then encountered a beautiful woman at a well. Her name was Rachel. She was somewhat impressed with Jacob too so she offered to take him home to meet her father Laban. At first things go very well. Laban was actually a distant relative so Jacob held out hope that perhaps this fourth or fifth cousin would care for him or perhaps take him into the family business. But if you have ever been in business with a family member, you know what comes next-conflict!

Laban saw an opportunity to take advantage of his distant relative. He knew that Jacob had his eyes on Rachel. Jacob was so smitten that he agreed to work seven years for Laban, just to be able to marry his daughter. But Rachel had a plain looking older sister named Leah, and Laban was committed to getting her married off first. At the end of seven years of labor, in the darkness of the night, Laban pushes Leah into the marriage tent instead of Rachel. By morning, Jacob had figured it out. "Why have you deceived me?" he screamed. Laban answered, "In our family it would be terrible for the youngest girl to marry first." Jacob was stuck. He had to stay married to Leah. And then he had to work for seven more years to gain the hand of Rachel.

Complicated, isn't it? But the story didn't end there. Later in Genesis, it gets more interesting. As you might imagine, two sisters married to the same man is not a proper set-up

for a happy family. Leah and Rachel argued. Then they teamed up with Jacob to steal the livestock of dear old dad. All of this is the stuff that reality television is made of!

When we read this story over as part of our Lenten study, we asked the question: why would this be here in the Bible? What is the purpose of this complicated and disappointing family tale? I suppose there are some purely academic reason for its placement in the book of Genesis. It helps explain the origins of the various tribes of Israel, Jacob's family. After all, without Leah- Reuben and Levi and Judah would never have been born, not to mention Moses. Perhaps the story was first told to give reason to feuds or resentment between peoples. The Hebrew people could tell this story and say to themselves, "See, this fight with your distant cousins started way back at the beginning of time!" Perhaps it is a reminder of our human nature, that we see in our human partners both Rachel and Leah, the one we want to love and the one we get to love.

But hopefully there is more. There isn't really any mention of God in this particular story. It is an utterly human, earthy story. In his commentary on the tale, Biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad calls it, "a droll story of the coarsest kind." It doesn't seem very inspiring or even remotely theological. But maybe- just maybe, that is why the story is told.

It is the story of a family, a family in a real mess, a family whose troubles are more complicated than ours. Yet it is a story that speaks to our relationships. It is the story of a family, where even the best of intentions can cause hurt and division. It is the story of a family where the person you marry is not always the person you thought he or she was. It is the story of a family, where we mean to love each other, but sometimes our love for ourselves gets the better of our love for each other. It is a story where the in-laws often become out-laws. It is the story of discovering relatives you perhaps wish you'd never met. It is the story of family, where despite our best love and our greatest efforts, most of the damage of life can be done.

As we read this story, it does sound strange at first. Then, before it is over, it might hit close to home. This story is the story of a family reunion. It reunites us with these long-lost relatives from ages ago, people we thought much different from us. We are reminded again that many of the early stories of the Bible are designed to teach us about what it means to be human and what it means to be part of the human family.

And through it all, there is God. God is not specifically mentioned by name. God is never standing there to settle the arguments or to referee the important disputes. Again von Rad writes, "God's work descended deeply into the lowest worldliness and there was hidden past recognition...God's work was not brought out into the open with pious words." But God was there behind the scenes. Even in this strange family story, there is the promise of God.

The book of Genesis is the story of a family, of God's relentless determination to have a relationship with a people. The promise began with Jacob's grandfather and grandmother, Abraham and Sarah, the promise to make them a family through which all of the families on earth might be blessed. And Jacob isn't just some annoying son-in-law. He is the one God eventually uses, even through selfish schemes, even through disputes with his brother and father-in-law, to bless the world with God's promise.

Vacations and reunions may be difficult reminders that in families and relationship, there is love and joy, pain and hurt. That is the way of families. Scripture tells us it has always been that way. But God meets us where we are. God meets us in our families. We know that God is with us in times of deep affection and loving acceptance. It is good to know that God stands with us too, bringing light to misunderstanding, jealousy, and resentment. Even with our families, God moves the story along. God, although not always obviously, at least gradually moves us toward a promise.

