

What's Scripture Good For?

Genesis 29:15-28

Rev. Dan Schumacher

It was several years ago, and I was attending a wedding. I sat in the midst of the gathered congregation as two of my friends met at the altar to be joined in marriage.

The music played. The procession began. The pastor officiating the wedding went through the usual routines.

When the music changed and the bride came forward, he invited us all to stand. We dutifully obeyed, while peaking over our shoulders to get our first glimpse of her in her wedding dress.

When she got to the altar, he turned to us and said, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to unite these two in marriage" — as if we didn't know that when we pulled into a church parking lot on a Saturday morning.

He asked who was "giving" the bride away. "Her mother and I," said her father.

He spoke about "love" and "holy matrimony" and the symbolic meaning of why we exchange rings — all things that I do for every wedding I officiate.

Then he moved into his homily. And for it, he used as his scripture passage our text for this morning — the story of how Jacob and Rachel were united. He spoke eloquently about the depth of Jacob's love for Rachel — how Jacob would do anything for her — even enter into indentured servitude for 14 long years — and how "they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her" (Gen. 29:20).

Oh, it sounded so romantic when he told the story. We all nodded in agreement as he pointed to Jacob's love of Rachel as the high-water mark of what marital love ought to be. We all "amen-ed" when he encouraged this young couple before us to be exemplars of the Biblical model of marriage that Rachel and Jacob had given us in scripture. We stood witness as they made vows of commitment to one another, as they kissed (in church!), as they shoved cake into each others faces, and then as they shared their first dance as a married couple. (Clearly, it wasn't a Baptist church.)

And I had been so moved by the pastor's homily that after the wedding I went home and opened my Bible to Genesis chapter 29, so that I could read with my own eyes the story of Jacob and Rachel's undying love.

And do you know what I found? What I found was not a story of undying love. It really wasn't even a love story at all. It was the story of how Laban out-conned his con artist nephew, Jacob — AND how Laban willfully and intentionally used his own daughters as collateral in order to get 14 years of free labor out of Jacob — turning them into sister-wives.

You can try to church it up, but this story isn't exactly the stuff most women or men dream about when they dream of their wedding day.

Do me a favor. Take a moment to remember some of the high ideals of what you understand marital love to be about – ideals like mutuality, commitment and covenant, unconditional love, “in sickness and in health.”

Now, keep those high ideals at the forefront of your mind, and listen to me read this story to you again. But this time raise your eyebrows every time you hear something that would make you raise your eyebrows if you were sitting across the table from a close friend and they were telling you that this is how *their* marriage came about:

Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?”

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”

Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.”

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.”

So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. 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?”

Laban said, “This is not done in our country – giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”

Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife (Genesis 29:15-28).

Jacob wanted to be paid not with money or wealth or a share of the herd, but with one of Laban's daughters. Laban not only agreed, but then snuck his other daughter into Jacob's tent on his wedding night, knowing that once Jacob consummated the marriage, he wouldn't be able to back out. Laban then used Jacob's desire for his other daughter to get another seven years of hard labor out of Jacob. And neither daughter had any say or

control throughout the whole thing. They were just commodities to be sold and traded. They might as well have had price tags arounds their wrists and barcodes tattooed on their forearms.

How many times did you raise your eyebrows? I mean, where is the redeeming value of this story? Where is the spiritual or moral lesson? Where is the good news? Is there any good news?? What is this story good for?

One of my favorite preachers tried to church this story up. He made it a sermon about how we all marry *both* Leah and Rachel... and as he preached it, I couldn't help but wonder how his *wife* heard that one. What, is she Rachel when she's all made up and ready for a night on the town, and Leah when she first crawls out of bed in the morning? I'm trying to imagine preaching that sermon, and Christen still being there when I got home!

That preacher meant it more like when we make our vow to our spouse, we are making the vow to love them "for better or worse." But it doesn't quite translate so well: "I promise to love you when you are beautiful like Rachel, and when you grow old and your eyes grow 'weak and tired' like Leah."

You see what I'm saying? It doesn't quite work, does it?

I keep thinking back to that wedding where the pastor held this story up as the model of a biblical marriage — and I want to ask him if he has daughters, and, if so, would he ever consider arranging their marriages like Laban arranged this one for his two daughters?

Would he sell his daughter for the cost of seven year's labor or would he want her to choose her spouse based on something like — I don't know — mutual love and affection? Would he sneak in his older daughter on the wedding night and trick his new son-in-law into sleeping with the wrong daughter? Would he use his daughter's beauty to leverage another seven years out of his son-in-law? Would he want both of his daughters married to the same man at the same time?! We have laws against such things!

Do you see what I'm saying? The story of Jacob and Rachel is no more a romantic wedding story, than a crass locker room joke is a love story.

This story isn't about love or the ideal marriage. It's about how Jacob, the con artist, was finally outwitted by someone else. And, unfortunately, Leah and Rachel were simply commodities caught in the exchange.

So, what is this story good for? What good is it for the life of a Christian, for the life of any person of faith? What's it good for?

Sometimes scripture is meant *to instruct us* on a higher way of living – like when Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Sometimes scripture is meant *to encourage us* when our lives are filled with hardship and uncertainty – like when the prophet Isaiah speaks with the voice of God and says, “I have made you. I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (Isaiah 46:4).

Sometimes scripture is meant *to provide us a glimpse of who God is* – like when Moses experienced the *holiness of God* at that burning bush (Exodus 3:5), or when the Psalmist sings of *God’s steadfast love* (Psalm 136), or when Amos proclaims *God’s penchant for justice* (Amos 5:24), or when Paul cannot help but preach of the all-encompassing *grace of God* (Romans 5:20). All such passages reveal to us something of who *God* is.

And sometimes... sometimes the purpose of scripture isn’t just to reveal to us who God is, but *who we are*.

In fact, this might be the most important work of scripture, because if we cannot see ourselves for who we truly are, then we won’t be able to recognize our need for instruction on a higher way of life or desire to stand in the holy presence of God or to seek out justice for others or even comprehend our own need for God’s all-encompassing grace.

Sometimes scripture is the mirror that helps us see ourselves for who we really are.

If we will let it, the story of Jacob and Laban is a story meant to help us see our own tendencies to use others in order to achieve our desires.

Sometimes we *mean* to use others – like when we manipulated our little brother or sister into doing our chores for us. At other times, we *don’t* mean to use others – like when we put unspoken pressure on our spouse or partner to “complete us,” as if we aren’t a whole person without their help. But just because we *don’t mean* to use others, doesn’t mean we aren’t doing it.

Laban *meant* to use his daughters to get what he wanted out of Jacob. Later, Leah *meant* to use the birth of her children to foment jealousy in her sister, Rachel. And Jacob? Jacob was the “god-father” of using others to get what he wanted.

If we will dwell long enough in this story, I imagine what we’ll find is that, like Jacob and Laban, we are prone to use others to get what we want, too.

It’s so easy to deny the image of God in others, and instead see them with dollar signs in our eyes or as an object of our lustful desires or as someone to serve as our scapegoat or as a punching bag or as someone to make us feel complete, even if just for a moment.

And anytime we treat someone else as *a thing to be used* and not as a person made in the image of God, we walk in the ways of Laban and Jacob.

Sometimes, what we most need is the mirror that will tell us the truth about ourselves – that will help us see who we really are – because it's only then that we might let God begin to do God's redeeming work in us.

And that's the paradox of the Christian life, isn't it? The paradox of the Christian life is that it's only when we are willing to recognize our own brokenness that God can actually do something good within us.

Only when we're willing to pull that piece of tape off of the check engine light and acknowledge that we need some repairs can the Great Mechanic get to work. Only when we agree to the MRI so that we can see what's happening in deep within us can the Great Physician get to work. Only when we're willing to take a good hard look in that mirror that we call scripture and see ourselves for who we really are can the Great Redeemer get to work.

This past week, I saw a news story about an amateur artist named Steve Derrick, who since the start of the coronavirus pandemic has been painting portraits, because he wanted to do something as a "thank you" for those serving on the front lines of hospitals. So he got his paints and his supplies and he headed into his basement studio where he spent hours upon hours painting portraits.

And here's the thing: when Steve Derrick paints a portrait, there aren't any touch-ups, no filters to smooth out the wrinkles, no corrections to remove blemishes. When Steve Derrick paints a portrait, he includes every bruise, every bag, and every blood vessel.

These are not portraits of the doctors, nurses, and techs at their most glamorous, but portraits of frontline medical professionals at the end of a 12-hour shift, mask lines indented on their face, bridges of their noses bruised from wearing masks day after day, hair disheveled and unkempt, eyes tired and bloodshot. These portraits are far from glamorous.

In fact, at one point the interviewer said to Steve, "You're not capturing them at their best moment."

And without hesitation Steve Derrick, amateur artist, replied, "I think I am" (Steve Hartmann, "Portraits of Medical Heroes," *CBS Sunday Morning*, July 19, 2020).

And that is exactly how God feels about us when we open scripture and let it do its work in us.

Amen.