

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Bait and Switch"

Based on Genesis 29:15-30

Just when you think Jacob is turning his life around, getting his priorities straight and pulling up his bootstraps to become the kind of man and the kind of leader YHWH wanted him to be, the story takes a turn in another direction, which leaves you thinking, "Hmmm?!?"

Jacob was in love. But Jacob had nothing to offer for that love. The irony was, that while Jacob was a rich man after stealing the family inheritance, it was his brother he had cheated, who was at home managing that fortune, while he, Jacob, wandered the desert. But right here and now, Jacob wanted Rachel. And in a world that revolved around barter or trade, Jacob had nothing to barter or trade for Rachel's hand in marriage. (Yes, ladies, I know that offends our sensibilities!)

But what luck! Turned out that Rachel's family were related to Jacob's: distant enough that there shouldn't be any bad politics between them, but close enough to keep destiny, 'all in the family.

"It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me." (Gen. 29:19)

It seemed like the perfect fit. Laban, Rachel's father, was a rich man, looking to become richer. An alliance within the family name and an extra pair of sturdy hands to help with the workload was a win-win for Laban. Jacob was a man in need of restoring his honour and his fortune and Rachel was his one-way ticket back into the world. Oh yes, and there was the sheep.

JACOB WAS IN
LOVE WITH
RACHEL AND
SAID, "I'LL WORK
FOR YOU SEVEN
YEARS IN
RETURN FOR
YOUR YOUNGER
DAUGHTER
RACHEL."

~GENESIS 29:18

Now the romantic side of me reads what happened next and gets all warm and mushy inside:

So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her. (Gen. 29:20)

Seven years seemed like a long time to wait. Then again, perhaps not when you are in love. But wait, there's more. When the great wedding day arrived, the wine flowed freely, the veils were heavy, and the dancing was intoxicating. The next morning Jacob discovered he had been duped by the master trickster himself, and married off to the wrong daughter! Now I don't know about you, but that doesn't seem like a mistake you can just pass off with a "Oops! So sorry, my mistake. Whoopsie!" So, another seven years passed, and the process was repeated. Jacob now had two wives: an acceptable practice of the day. (Yes ladies, I know!)

You will notice in all this that there was no comment from the sisters about how they have been pawns in the game of love-chess between Laban and Jacob. Or were they in on the game the whole time? (Yes, I know, that's an awful thing to suggest!) Other than his morning after outcry, Jacob seemed happy enough to work *another* seven years to earn the hand of Rachel. He must really have been in love with her. Or, does something smell a little fishy to you? Or perhaps I should say, "Does something smell a little 'sheepy' to you?"

Some scholars look at this whole story rather skeptically and suggest that the real issue at play here was not love, but sheep. We know that Jacob grew to have a keen eye on the care and breeding of sheep. He made Laban a very wealthy man because of his ability to breed sheep with the finest wool that commanded the highest price at the market after shearing. And we know that Jacob needed sheep restore his own name and fortune. So this arrangement, whatever it was in truth: lovely, or sheeepy, was working out for both of them rather nicely.

But the murky waters of this scenario were about to get more muddied, if that were possible. For an age-old problem in the women's tent began to take shape soon after the weddings. While Leah might not have been the preferred wife, she was very good at bearing sons; meanwhile, the beautiful Rachel struggled to bear children at all. Soon, jealousy, rage and bitterness began to rear their ugly heads again, just as they had two generations before with Jacob's grandparents: Abraham and Sarah. The only thing a man of ancient day wanted more than sheep, was sons, who could carry on the family name and care for the herds. The only thing a woman of ancient day wanted, was to give her husband sons, and be remembered in history as an honourable woman. Things were getting very messy.

So let's review.

Jacob was a spoiled brat: clever and ambitious, but not in the 'hard-working-fella' kind of style. His mother helped him grab the family fortune out of his brother's hands, for which he promptly had to head out of town. He disappeared into the desert to lie low, almost died in the baking sun, had a strange dream, bumped into distant relatives, fell in love, was tricked by his father-in-law or his daughters (or both) to marry the wrong sister, discovered he had a knack for raising sheep, and became rich again finding a market for the black wool of the odd sheep that no one wanted, because of course, it was black, not white. Now you know where the expression "black sheep of the family" came from. Suits Jacob quite well, don't you think?

Does any of this sound 'normal' to you? This just sounds messy to me. This sounds very messy to me. But maybe that's the point. Maybe it's not that when our lives **gets** messy, it's a test to see if we are resilient and faithful, but more that life **is** messy, and God is resilient and faithful to us as we plough our way through.

- Maybe we are supposed to keep wading through the messy moments and realize that somewhere in the mess, God is there messing around with us.
- Maybe we're supposed to keep our heads above water because God is taking us somewhere.

- Maybe we're supposed to keep plodding along because God is making use of us, right there in the middle of our mess.
- Maybe our lives are not supposed to be so neat and tidy, because when things get messy, we have to hang on to God for strength, we have to cling to hope for a better tomorrow, we have to believe that with God, all things, no matter how impossible, are possible in His time.
- Maybe, we are supposed to trust Him, and keep moving forward.

Without Jacob, the story of our faith would have ended, long ago, lost to the sands of time. There would have been no twelve sons, no Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat, no reconciliation with his brother, no legacy, no Christ. Our God needed Jacob, and Jacob's mess.

Because Jacob was and is a part of the living story. Our God needs you, because you are a part of the story too.

- Messy life, or simple life.
- Complicated situations, and well kept secrets.
- Love lost, and love gained.
- God needs you, to "Keep Calm and Carry On."

And one more things, watch out for black sheep!
Amen.