



## “Looking into Leah’s Eyes”

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*Genesis 29:15-28*

The bride and groom were beaming. Their eyes sparkled with anticipation and their smiles shined with joy as the father of the bride stood proud. “Who presents this woman to be married to this man?” The father of the bride responded, “Her mother and I.” The father and daughter stole a moment to hug and kiss, and then the time came for the bride and groom to approach me on the chancel. They moved forward with grace and care when all of the sudden the bride’s head snapped back with a violent crack as if she were caught in a fishing line. Her father, who was slow to sit down in his designated pew, was unknowingly standing on the train of her veil. He quickly lifted his foot, the matron of honor fixed the crooked headpiece, and the couple elect finally found their way up the steps to my waiting grin. I then said to the bride, “It appears that your father wasn’t quite ready to let you go.”

I’ve done a lot of weddings. During my very first wedding I said, “Who presents this man to be married to this woman?” The shocked father of the bride stood silently while the seated parents of the groom looked at each other and sheepishly raised their hands. At another wedding, which took place on a beach, the sun was setting and the waves were rumbling in the distance. The stunning brides were getting ready to walk the center aisle of folding chairs together to the pergola when one of the flower girls decided it was just the right time to sit down in that aisle and start building a sandcastle. I mean, we were at the beach.

These missteps and mistakes happen at weddings. I don’t know many weddings that go exactly as planned – the bridal party attendants wear ill-fitting dresses, the groomsmen miss their marks on the steps, the relatives can’t find their seats, the organist is late, or the ring-bearer cries his way down the aisle. But none of that seems to matter too much, because when the couple stands in front of me, they often steal a glance at each other. They give each other that look. They give each other that first day of being married look like, “This is so easy... this is the best... we’ve got this.” They give each other that lovely look. But then we catch a glimpse at the parents of the wedding couple, or the married friends of the wedding couple and we see that tired look, that weak look. These seasoned couples know what marriage is all about. But you know, sometimes the wedding couple steals a glance

at each other and I see a twinge of apprehension or fear in their eyes. It's at that time I bet they had read the Genesis text for today. They weren't sure if they were marrying Leah or Rachel.

In today's story, God is remarkably absent. Without God in the picture, we continue to focus on a hardworking and determined Jacob who felt like he had to grab his blessings. From his birth, to his patriarchal birthright, to his divine blessing at the base of the ladder, to his being presented a wife, Jacob was a blessing and he continued to be blessed. He was promised a blessing before he was even born. It was a blessing from heaven. He didn't earn it but he certainly screwed it up. Preacher and author Craig Barnes said that Jacob hustled his blessing. And we tend to hustle our blessings too. We pry our blessings from the hands of God.

We remember from the story several weeks ago that Jacob and Esau were twins, but they were very, very different. In the cultural ideals of the time, we clearly see society's preference for Esau. He was the first born, athletic, a good hunter, a provider. He would have been the first one picked for the kickball team while Jacob was the last player, the one you would get stuck with. Jacob wanted to stay inside and hide from all those who didn't like him. But he knew that his momma thought he was special. Jacob was impatient and impetuous, so he tried to make the blessing happen. He stole the blessing, he hustled the blessing, he grabbed the blessing and made it his. We think back to when he cooked the food, the red stew, and he played dress up, wearing the clothes of Esau and taping goat hair on his arms and on his neck. Then he went into the room with his blind father and tricked him, pulling the wool over his eyes and the rug out from underneath him. Barnes muses that it must have been a humorous sight for God to look down on a scrounging son with goat hair taped to his neck and then think, "Yup, this is my guy." Jacob stole his blessing and there was nothing else to do but run. He ran with the blessing burning a hole in his pocket. He ran from the brokenness of his family. He ran into the depression and into the desert to dodge the deathly anger of his brother Esau.

And then last week, we heard about Jacob at Beth-El and the blessing God gave him there, the same blessing God made to his father and to his grandfather that he would also have land, produce offspring, and be the chosen of God. Then God whispered in Jacob's deaf, dejected, and disconsolate spirit, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." It was a very

gracious promise for a man who was running for his life, who had hustled every blessing, who was going into hiding away from his home, his enemies, and from everyone he knew and loved.

Then, in the reading for this week, Jacob journeyed to his mother's birthplace and was welcomed by Laban, his uncle. Jacob had been so used to grabbing and hustling his blessing that he tried to hustle love, as well. According to the text, Jacob saw Rachel, Laban's younger daughter, and it was love at first sight. He was so filled with passion that he lifted a huge stone off of a well so Rachel could water Laban's flocks. Then Jacob approached Rachel and fell on her neck, crying. (Which is exactly how I wooed Amanda.) When Jacob met Laban, Laban asked him what his wages should be. They struck a deal and Jacob asked for Rachel in exchange for seven years of labor. In a passionate turn of phrase, the text says that those years "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

The seven years ended in a flash, and Jacob was eager to be with his bride. Then, on the wedding night, the trickster was tricked. It appears that tricking was a family trait. Laban schemed and deceived, and instead of the beloved Rachel, he snuck his older daughter into Jacob's tent. "In the morning, behold, it was Leah!" Jacob was shocked. He was scorned. The man who had deceived his blind father was himself deceived while blinded by night, or blinded by too much celebrating at the wedding feast.

The trickster was tricked, the deceiver was deceived. And it would've been easy this morning to preach a sermon on karma. There is a sense of poetic justice as we remember that Jacob broke the law of the firstborn when he conned his brother Esau out of his birthright. And now, Jacob is caught by another "law of the firstborn" in which the younger daughter could not be married off before the older daughter. He had to marry Leah first, then Rachel. The trickster was tricked, what goes around comes around.

But I noticed something else in this story, something other than the transformation of the trickster Jacob. I looked at the other characters and I saw Leah. I looked into Leah's eyes and saw a person on the margins. This story today is told from Jacob's point of view, from the perspective of the people in power. The storytellers were not interested in Leah's life or how she experienced those long and lonely years. Leah's feelings for Jacob were never described or held in value. When Laban deceived Jacob, Jacob was furious. And do you think he went to Laban and fought for Leah's life? Do you think he stormed into Laban's tent and said, "How could

you have done this to your daughter?” No, he said, “How could you have done this to me?” Leah’s voice was silent.

Leah was probably disappointed to marry someone she didn’t love and who didn’t love her. In fact, as far as I can tell, when using the primary Hebrew verb for “love,” no woman at all in the Bible was described as loving anyone else. It is a harsh reminder that the Bible was written from a patriarchal perspective and that we must be constantly diligent to give voice to the marginalized people in the text. Rachel and Leah were given to Jacob like possessions. This was in dramatic contrast to Jacob’s own mother’s marriage, in which, as Joanna preached several weeks ago, Rebekah was hospitable and filled with great courage and gave consent to be married. But Leah did not get that choice.

Leah was misunderstood and mistreated. Even her name did her a great disservice because it is translated, “wild cow.” The devalued Leah was an afterthought in this story except for one important line – that Leah’s eyes were lovely. Most translations have a negative understanding of this part of the text saying that Leah’s eyes were weak. Many commentators think that means she was ugly to look at or that she was a homely girl who couldn’t see two feet in front of her face. But as I read this text, I noticed something interesting about Leah’s eyes. When I looked into Leah’s eyes, I didn’t see weakness. I saw loveliness. The word for “weak” in Hebrew, *rak*, was never used in a demeaning way or to describe any defect. For example, in the text we looked at several weeks ago about the messengers of God who came to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, Abraham sought to provide lavish hospitality by going to his herd and taking a *rak*, a tender calf, and giving it to his servant to prepare. We will see this word used again, this time by Jacob, in an upcoming chapter in Genesis in reference to the young children who were too frail, tender to be hurried during Jacob’s reuniting with Esau. I wonder if we shouldn’t consider the term “weak” as a defect but as gentleness and delicacy. Leah had gentle eyes. She had lovely eyes.

But Jacob didn’t look into the eyes of Leah and see loveliness. He saw weakness. He didn’t notice anyone but Rachel. He didn’t respect anyone but Laban. And because of the treachery of Jacob and Laban and the marginalization of Leah, it is extremely difficult to find the good news in this text. Phyllis Tribble, my Hebrew Scriptures professor in seminary, called stories like these “texts of terror.” Texts of terror are places in the Bible that hurt and kill women and devalue the marginalized. And I think it is important to learn from these stories because we witness texts of terror happening each and every day. As we see in the lives of

Jacob and Laban, there are people in power today who care only about winning and grabbing while watching the innocent and powerless suffer. When our elected leaders want healthcare to fail and people to lose health security, they are not looking into Leah's eyes. When the President of the United States says that transgender people are burdens and disruptions, he is not looking into Leah's eyes. When policy makers cause refugees to suffer, people of other faiths to be scared, and the poor to struggle, they are not looking into Leah's eyes. Who will hurt the most when those in power grab and win? It is the ones further down the line. It is the Leahs.

Even though Jacob loved Rachel much more than he did Leah, the Lord, in whose heart there is a special place for all those who are ignored and unloved, looked after Leah, not because of her power or position, but because of her need, because she was lovely. Leah eventually became pregnant and the mother of many children, while Rachel, the one well-loved by Jacob, was for a long time barren. Then, when the time came that Rachel died, she was buried by the side of the road. Leah, when she died, was buried in the family plot with Abraham and Isaac and eventually Jacob. In the end, Leah was given a place of honor and was finally seen as lovely, not weak.

We know there are tricksters all around us. We know there are times when it is easier to hustle our blessings and deceive our way through life. We know there are times when we are the ones who are loved and the ones beautiful to the world. We are Jacob. We are Laban. We are Rachel. But... we are also Leah. It is our job to notice the Leahs in our lives. It is our calling as the people of God to look into Leah's eyes and see loveliness, not weakness. We have to choose what we see in Leah's eyes. Do we see those on the margins as weak or see them as lovely? We have to make the choice to love all of God's people, to love the Leahs, the Rachels, the Esaus, and the Jacobs. We cannot transform others to meet our expectations on what is lovely. We cannot and should not turn Leah into Rachel. Leah is already lovely. Leah is already gentle. God loves Leah and God created Leah. God sees us all, looks us all in the eyes, and names us beloved. And the voices of all those on the margin will be heard... when we look into Leah's lovely eyes.

Amen.