“Better Look under the Veil”

July 30, 2017

Genesis:29-1-28

First Presbyterian Church, Logan

 After Jacob gives his “affirmation of faith” from last week, he continues fleeing from his brother Esau’s wrath. He comes to this well and sees three flocks of sheep lying there for it was where they quenched their thirst. Wells often served as meeting places for men and women throughout the middle east. This sounds like an ancient version of the modern-day watering hole. I am sure that many of you remember the exact moment that you met your spouse. Maybe you met each other in elementary school. Maybe it was college. Maybe it was at work. For my parents, I had heard the story often. My father had just gotten back from studying abroad in the Netherlands. He had a nice beard going and looked like he had been gone away for a long time. He was a member of the fraternity Alpha Gamma Rho at the University of Wisconsin River Falls. They had a reputation for throwing great parties in their sprawling frat house. My mother recalls him walking down the stairs in his bearded glory. She thought I need to get to know that guy. And that was where it all began.

 For Sara and I we did meet at a watering hole. I often get strange looks when as a pastor I tell people that I met my wife in a bar. It was august of 2012 and I was at cowboy slim’s, a country bar in uptown Minneapolis, the trendy section of west Minneapolis. This was one of our favorite spots to go. I was with two of my best friends. I was off standing in line for a drink, and someone behind me says, “hey, do I know you?” I turned around and I said, “Oh, do you?” And that was the first time I saw Sara. Eventually I found out that we had gone to the same college, knew the same people, but never talked before. And that was where it all began.

 Back to the ancient watering hole. He sees some guys hanging around the well. So he starts up a conversation. My brothers, where do you come from? We are from Haran. Do you know Laban? We do. And here comes his daughter Rachel. For now, his life was going to change, just like it did for my father coming down those stairs. When he saw Rachel, he decided he needed to impress her. He rolled away a very heavy stone with superhuman strength. Notice in verse 3, it took several shepherds to roll away the stone covering the well. Jacob could do it all by himself. After his impressive posturing, he kisses Rachel and weeps. He must recognize that this is the woman that he is to fall in love with.

 Eventually he makes it to his uncle’s house. Jacob could now relax as he was in relative safety. “So, Jacob, since you are going to be staying here for a while, what should I pay you to work for me?” We find out that Laban has another daughter, Leah, she sounds nice, but Jacob loves Rachel. “I will serve you for seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man, stay with me,” Laban agrees.

 Can you imagine what those seven years would have been like for Jacob? It says it seemed like a few days to him because he loved her so much. But what would it have been like. He probably snuck a look at her every chance he got. Perhaps he tried to pass her notes like many of us did in middle school. But seven years! Do any of us have that kind of love? Could we have waited that long? So close but yet so far away. He probably dreamt every night of her. And hopefully he found a better pillow than that rock. I wonder if he had to sit across the dinner table from her every night. But not be able to hug or kiss her. Imagine the torture that might be. Did he keep a calendar on the wall? Counting down the days until he would get married to the woman that he so desperately loves.

 Finally, the wedding day arrives. Jacob was anticipating this day for weeks. He approaches Laban. This part does not seem to fit the story. “Give me my wife that I may go into her, for my time is completed.” How courteous of Jacob. Couldn’t he at least have said, Laban, I have served my time, may I now have the pleasure of marrying your daughter. No, instead he just demands. Seems that he thought that Rachel was something to be earned and not a person. It still works, Laban gathers everyone together for the festivities. The big day is here. The feast was delicious. Then Jacob goes off to the honeymoon suite with his new wife.

 They wake up the morning after. Most likely exhausted from the nights festivities. Jacob rolls over and notices, this doesn’t look like Rachel! It was Leah! Understandable furious, he rushes out of the honeymoon suite and confronts Laban. “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” The trickster has been tricked. Deception is a family business. This isn’t how we do things around here. We don’t but the second born before the first born. Doesn’t work like it did at your house. But I will make you another deal. You can marry Rachel also. If you work for me another seven years. This deal Jacob accepts right away. For poor Leah she is stuck. Jacob will always love Rachel more.

 All of us have been to plenty of weddings I am sure. And some of us have been at the end of the aisle. I still remember just over two years ago when Sara came walking down the aisle. The most beautiful bride in the world walked down the aisle. Then she came up and took my hands. We snuck a peek into each other’s eyes. This is the same thing that so many couples do. I have only officiated two weddings up to this point. Both couples did the same thing. As soon as the bride got to the groom, they quickly stared into each other’s eyes. Perhaps it is because they know this story. Even without the veil, they need to know exactly who it is that they are marrying. There is no going back after that.

 On our wedding days, we recognize exactly it is who we are marrying. But there will come a day, where we don’t. Probably not the next morning. But there will be a day when we wake up and realize that this isn’t exactly the person who we thought it was. Whoever it is that we love, it is both Leah and Rachel. You can love one more than the other, but they are both a part of the same person. But you can’t have Rachel without taking Leah. And you don’t love Leah, didn’t think you were getting her. You can work forever turning Leah into Rachel, but it won’t work. Maybe Leah didn’t want to marry Jacob either. Her Father just stuck her with Jacob.

 I think it is important to mention that many metaphors are flawed. Here in this story as in many texts in the Old Testament, the women have no choice. They are property. And poor Leah gets tricked into marrying Jacob. We have no idea if that is what she wanted. It says that her eyes were lovely, but in other translations, it says Leah has weak eyes. She is placed in opposition to Rachel who is beautiful and graceful. So can easily be stretched to Leah was ugly and Rachel was a knockout beauty. Rachel was favored. Leah could only get married if the man was tricked into it. So where is the good news in that? That these two women were just used as pawns in Laban’s scheme. Just like the beginning of the story with Jacob, this family’s story is told honestly. Warts and all. That God uses imperfect, broken families. Just like God uses imperfect and broken people like us.

 To continue with the metaphor, remember when you first started to date someone? You start to notice little flaws. Don’t worry Sara, I am not going to stand up here and mention all your flaws. Anyway, you notice some of these things right away. Maybe you think they are little quirks. He sure loves watching football, I am glad he has a great passion. She loves to shop a lot, she has a really great sense of fashion. He sure talks to his mother a lot, he must really love his family.

 Maybe these things just bother you 5% of the time. But there might be a day that comes that this 5% dominates your time and energy. I am sick of picking up after my spouse. I know that they love their career, but they need to spend more time with me! Rachel is the clear symbol of who you want to spend your time with, but sometimes you get a lot of Leah. The more you try to change Leah into Rachel, the worse it gets. Your loved one just gets defensive and insecure.

 Most of all we need to realize that our spouse is a human being. We are not perfect. And falling in love is not a matter of will. We can’t make ourselves fall in love with someone. We just do. We are called by God to love our enemies. Surely our spouse or loved one is not our enemy. Sometimes it seems like parts of them are. Leah or Jacob may hurt us. I am sure that all of us has been hurt by someone we love. Our instinct is to put distance between us and them. Maybe we want to hurt them back. We are called by Christ to be reconcilers. To return that hurt with love. Often it feels like there is no way humanly possible. That is the point. To turn to the one who loves more than our human possibilities. To turn to God’s love.

 This metaphor can be extended to the church as well. As I have been here just a couple of weeks, this is what we would call the honeymoon period. In this call, I have felt like I have found Rachel. A great beautiful church with great people. It won’t always be this way. I know Leah is here too. She will turn up in some difficulty along the way. I hope in me, that you have found your Rachel. At some point, I will disappoint you and Leah will show up. I have flaws and along the way they will be discovered. I will disappoint you, you will disappoint me and we will disappoint each other.

 This makes me think of the senior pastor at my former church in Greensboro. Early on when he started there, there was a 9 am service and an 11am. The 9am was the most popular service while the 11am was sparsely attended and trended much older. Most churches in Greensboro had their popular service at 11am. So when people came to visit while looking for a new church, they would come to the 11am service. They would come in, and see the sparse crowd in this huge sanctuary. Then guess what, they would never come back. Sid noticed this and thought we better change the service times. Well I bet you can guess what happened. They came for his head. No one messes with my worship time! The vitriol was so strong that he thought he was going to give up. It was a terribly contentious time in the church. The situation brought out the Leah in the pastor and the congregation. Eventually the worship time was changed. It worked out. Things could have gone very badly. He could have been out of a job. People could have went to a different church. Probably some did. But this decision was made to welcome new people into the community.

 What will happen here when a decision is pending that could cause conflict. Will we see Leah and try to run away? Or will we learn to love Leah? Just like with our personal relationships, our relationship with the church can be shaky at times. Not everybody is going to like me. I probably won’t like everybody. But I will try my best to love you. To be a pastoral presence to you. Especially when it is hard. That is my promise to you all. I will try my best to learn to love Leah.

 The only place where the Lord comes directly into this story is at the very end. When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb. As much as she was used as a pawn in this story, God grants her the gift of a child. This is not an easy story. It is messy. This is a family with a lot of conflict and deceit. But God loves them anyway. God makes that promise to prosper and to be with them.

 What does it look like when we learn to love Leah. To love the flawed people in our lives? Once we make that choice, we can choose how we perceive those flaws. Will we see Leah’s eyes as weak or lovely. When we look into our loved one’s eyes after we know who they really are, will we see them as weak? Or lovely? What about when we look at this church? Is it weak or is it lovely? When we look under that veil, we will see both Leah and Rachel. Can we love them both?

**Jacob Marries Laban’s Daughters**

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?’16Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. 18Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, ‘I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.’ 19Laban said, ‘It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.’ 20So 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.’ 22So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. 23But 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.) 25When 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?’26Laban said, ‘This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. 27Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years.’ 28Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.