



Poland Presbyterian Church

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July 31, 2016

The third in a series by
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The Jacob Chronicles: A Love Story

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

The Jacob Chronicles are six scenes in the life of a man whom God chose: Jacob, the son of Isaac. They are the stories of his journey. It is not merely journey overland, it is a spiritual journey: a journey of encounter, a journey of change, a journey that leads to maturation. Ultimately is the story of God, working in the life of an individual, molding, shaping, changing a human soul through encounters, dreams, and circumstances.

Today's chronicle is a love story, but the themes of change, spiritual growth and maturity are still present. In this message I will:

1. Retell this love story within its ancient context.
2. Comment on some of the interesting dynamics that are occurring and
3. Glean from the story particular lessons for our modern age.

I

The story begins with Jacob on the run. He was running from his brother Esau who had threatened to kill him. Jacob cheated Esau and stole his birthright and the blessing that was due him. He was also running to the land of his mother's ancestors. Rebecca, his mother, was always looking out for him because he was her favorite.

Being "the favorite" is not easy. Favorite sons often have a great deal of difficulty sustaining relationships. More often than not, mom does not think that any woman is good enough for her son and that is both a powerful and coercive influence. Rebecca wanted to make sure that her son Jacob married the right person and her biggest fear was that he would marry one of the local Hittite women.

She whined to Isaac: "If Jacob marries one of these Hittite women, what good will my life be to me." Isaac, concurred and the blessing that he bestowed on Jacob included an admonition to travel to his uncle's house. He told Jacob that his uncle Laban had two daughters' worthy of marriage.

You will recall that on that journey Jacob experienced two of the three events that break down egocentricity and contribute to the spiritual growth of a person:

- (1) suffering in the wilderness;
- (2) the encounter with a higher power.

Now he was about to experience the third: love and intimacy with another person.

He was living in the land of his Uncle Laban. While fetching water at a well, he suddenly beheld Rachel. She was keeping her father's sheep and it was love at first sight! He fell in love with her, and we might assume that she also fell in love with him. If there was music playing in the background of this story, it would be a light, playful melody that literally dances in one's hearing. Under the spell of his love for Rachel he entered a deal with his Uncle Laban. He would work for Laban for 7 years. After that period Laban would give him Rachel as a bride.

This was not the first time we have witnessed Jacob strike a bargain. We saw him bargain with Esau and with his father. Both times Jacob dealt from a position of strength, usually reinforced by his own cunning and deceit. But this time was different. He was bargaining with Laban while under the spell of love. He met his match in Laban. We should be shocked at the deal that Jacob struck. He agreed to work for seven years for Laban for the privilege of marrying Rachel. This was not slavery. Jacob entered the deal voluntarily and at any point would be able to vacate it. But it was drastically different than his previous bargains. This deal was completely out of character! One wonders why he didn't just steal Rachel and elope with her. Would that not be consistent with character? Yet under the spell of love, he agreed to serve Laban for seven years. Ah, the power of romantic love! We read those seven years "seemed like only a few days."

But Laban tricked him. On the day after his wedding night, Jacob realized that he married Leah, the older sister. The "chickens came home to roost." The description of Leah is not as bad as some have made her out to be, but she was not the one whom Jacob loved. In anger he went to Laban and agreed to work for seven more years. Seven days later Rachel was given in marriage to him. So in the space of one week, Jacob had two wives. Our love story ends somewhat happily.

II

But there were some interesting internal dynamics that occurred in this story: Jacob's transformation and growth. Last week I quoted the late John Sanford, an Episcopalian priest and psychologist. He

wrote that there are three things which change a human being: (*Sanford, John. The Man Who Wrestled With God, 1987, Paulist Press. p. 22.*)

- (1) suffering,
- (2) the encounter with a higher power, and
- (3) coming to care for someone other than one's self.

In Rachel, Jacob cared for someone other than himself, and thus the trinity of transformation was fulfilled in his journey.

Under the spell of love, he made a surprising bargain. Jacob had not distinguished himself as someone who was willing to work very hard. He was lazy and shifty and when things got rough, he ran. But in the grip of love, he agreed to work for seven years! One of the markers of maturity is the ability to delay gratification. There was no desire for immediate gratification here.

Let me digress for a second to comment on Romantic love. It is a wonderful thing, but it has a way of altering our reasoning ability. It is a passive state of being. We say that a person is "in love." It takes no effort to fall in love. It is one of the miracles of our creation. Yet, romantic love has a way of distorting reality, and often we see in the other person perfection. Romantic love puts its object on a pedestal. Everything seems right about that person and the relationship feels perfect. That is the power of romantic love. Underneath all the poetry and music of romantic love is the power of projection. *Often the object of romantic love is merely an extension of one's self.* In a culture, like ours, which holds romantic love as an ideal, such a view creates difficulties for relationships, because romance ultimately wanes. This crisis can be creative, because the couple is challenged to move from being "in love" to actively loving each other.

There is no doubt that Jacob was in love. His reality was distorted, consequently he agreed to Laban's deal. But all of this was tempered by the seven years of labor.

One of the ways to tell if a man loves a woman, and is not merely under the spell of romance is his willingness to work for her. The ancient custom of willingly giving labor for a period of time to earn the right to marry was psychologically healthy. It also broke down broke down egotism and selfishness and prepared an individual for a relationship with another. For Jacob it meant there were individuals who were more important than he was. This acknowledgement is the foundation of spiritual and psychological maturity. "It is not all about me."

Jacob worked seven years... and then seven more.

III

This love story has many lessons to offer: I will suggest three.

1. In this story of Jacob and Rachel, romance is tempered by the willingness to work. Good relationships and marriages are not merely about romance. Their foundation is an active love that is willing to work for the beloved.

I believe that the seven years of labor is more than symbolic. Romantic love, which is often characterized by urgency, is tempered by this seven-year bargain. One would think that at some time during those seven years Jacob might rethink the bargain that he made. He didn't! This was part of his transformation. He worked for seven years to be united with the one he loved.

The social customs of the ancient world handled a crisis for which couples are often unprepared today. Often after a period of time, (seven years?) romance fades. The drug of love wears off like Novocain on a tooth. This often produces a crisis, but it is a crisis with a remarkable opportunity. When one is no longer under the spell of romantic love, one begins to actively love another. Loving requires effort, and cannot be passive. It is then that we recognize the other as a real human being. It is then that we learn to both apologize and forgive with integrity. This is the foundation of active loving.

2. The power of love and the work of actively loving add a different dimension to the relationship of marriage. Marriage is not merely for companionship or the raising of children. A committed relationship is a gift that has the power to transform and contribute to the emotional and spiritual growth of an individual. Jesus, when he spoke of marriage, concurred with the writer of the creation story that individuals leave the homes of their parents and live together in marriage. If one does this with integrity, one leaves the comfort zone of family and experiences the intensity of a domestic relationship. This type has the power to transform an individual.
3. We live with the power of many myths. One of the pervasive ones in relationships is that we "can change" the other person. We need to examine this carefully. Jacob changed, but it was neither Rachel nor Leah that changed him. It was his own willingness to work that was transforming agent. Jacob actively participated in his own transformation and maturation. This is the miracle of love!

The story of Jacob and Rachel is one of the few love stories in the Bible. It is a beautiful account of romance. If we were to read further, we would discover that Jacob's relationship with these two women was anything but marital bliss. It was complex and trying... and yet he was prepared for it... by working seven years for another person... Seven years of caring without immediate gratification. After fourteen years of living with Laban, Jacob would grow and change. He would still be Jacob, and still possess the wit and the opportunism of his youth, but he would become a softer, wiser, mature individual....

But the chronicles of his life do not end there... he has unfinished business waiting at home... Esau is still there. The good news in this story is that God is active in the life of Jacob, but also ours. The love that changed Jacob is a love that still exists and it has the same power to enable individuals to grow spiritually, if they are willing to work. This is the Good News. Amen.