

**“Our Struggle with Love”**  
**Sermon Series on *A Faithful God for a Fallen People***  
**(Gen. 29:28-30:24)**  
**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**Introduction.**

One of the great privileges I have as a pastor is to officiate at weddings. I have the best seat in the house and get to see the expressions on the faces of the bride and groom as they exchange their vows. And I’ve officiated at some very memorable weddings over the years – like the one where the ring bearer was a bulldog named Marley who walked down the aisle with the ring attached to her collar. Or the wedding where when it came time for the couple to kneel for the wedding prayer, the congregation could see that someone had written in white shoe polish on the soles of the groom’s shoes the words “Help Me!” Then there was the wedding I did in which one of the guys in the wedding party had just returned from Russia, so all the groomsmen wore Russian hats. It was quite a scene at the wedding!

All the pastors in our church require that the couples we marry get premarital counseling, because it’s been proven that couples who do this before they marry get divorced less often and increase their chances of staying married their whole lives than those who don’t. In my case I require couples to spend 5 sessions with me in pre-marital counseling before their wedding in order to prepare for their marriage. I also have them come back for a six-month follow-up check-up after the wedding. That way I can at least guarantee their marriage for six months or 60,000 miles, whichever comes first!

Why is it that people struggle with love so much in our world today? Why do people have such a difficult time making a life together as husband and wife? Any way you slice it, the statistics about happiness in marriage and the rate at which people get divorced aren’t very good. There are a lot of reasons for this, and we don’t have time to address them all this morning. But I believe that the passage before us in Genesis 29 and 30 offers some insights...as well as some hope.

Let me also add that whether you’re married or not is beside the point in this passage. This is a story not just about marriage. It’s a story about love. And the chances are good that you have either been in love, or you are in love, or you will be at some point in the future. So this is really a story about relationships. It’s

about God's decision to bless us with someone to love, and our struggle to let go of the dream for someone who isn't quite what we were hoping for.

### **I. The Trophy Wife.**

Scholars have viewed the birth of the 12 sons of Jacob as an important moment in the plan of God when He shaped the early life of the nation of Israel. However, it is a very complicated and sad story about human weakness, jealousy and rivalry in the home. Without even knowing what happened following Jacob's multiple marriages, anyone could have easily predicted the disturbing results. You don't have to be a marriage counselor to see the storm coming.

But before we go too much further, we need to take a look at a little background to this story as it relates to marriage practices in the ancient Near East. You'll recall that Jacob's grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, came out of a totally pagan culture in Mesopotamia. It was a culture that allowed for all kinds of practices which were not aligned with God's plan for humanity, and the influence of these things lingered on for many generations. There are two practices in particular mentioned in this text that created problems for Jacob and his family – polygamy and surrogate motherhood.

Polygamy wasn't God's plan in the beginning. If it had been, the Lord would have created more than one wife for Adam in the Garden of Eden. But Eve was created to be his only wife. Polygamy was a result of sin entering the world, and wherever it has been practiced polygamy has always created problems. It's true that God tolerated this practice in Israel, even among some of His chosen servants like David and Solomon, but it wasn't His perfect will. And it always led to trouble and even failure in these leader's lives.

Surrogate motherhood was another practice that was actually written into the wedding contracts in Babylonian culture. It provided that a man could father children through other women provided by his wife. A wife who couldn't bear a child was obligated by the contract to provide her husband with a woman who could. Of course, this practice seems strange and exploitive of women to those of us who live in a culture that has been built on the moral laws of Scripture, like the Ten Commandments. But remember, the Ten Commandments wouldn't be given for another 400-500 years, and the cultural backdrop in the ancient Near East against which we read the story of Jacob, Rachel and Leah was a primitive one that had all kinds of problems.

Last week we learned that as soon as Jacob arrived in Haran where his uncle Laban lived, he met Laban's daughter Rachel out in the fields with her father's sheep. It was pretty much love at first sight, and Jacob was quite taken with Rachel. You'll recall that Jacob worked for 7 years to win her hand in marriage,

but on their wedding night Laban deceived Jacob and substituted Leah for his younger daughter. Jacob had to work another 7 years for Rachel, and he married both sisters.

Rachel was the trophy wife. She was beautiful and young, and Jacob was in love with her. Our passage says that the 7 years he worked for her hand in marriage seemed like only a few days to him. Rachel may have been beautiful, but she was also barren. In the ancient Near East, the ability to give birth to children was extremely important, and the failure to do so was considered a sign of God's disfavor. In spite of her beauty, and although she had her husband's love, she was jealous of her sister Leah's ability to have children, and she complained bitterly about it to Jacob. The two women competed with each other, and the infighting must have made the tents of this family a constant place of turmoil and unhappiness.

The episode with the mandrakes mentioned in this passage epitomizes the conflict between Rachel and Leah. Reuben, who was perhaps 4- or 5-years-old at this time, was out in the fields during the wheat harvest and he found some mandrake plants, which he brought home to his mother Leah. The mandrake is a plant with a small orange-colored, berry-like fruit that can be eaten. In antiquity it was regarded as an aphrodisiac and something that could help produce fertility. This belief explains Rachel's interest in the child's discovery. Rachel begged Leah for some of the mandrakes. Obviously, she thought they might help her get pregnant.

Leah shot back, "Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you also take my son's mandrakes?" Instead of arguing with her sister, Rachel agreed to send Jacob to Leah's bed that night in return for what she hoped would cure her infertility. Here the two sister's battle with each other and their jealous rivalry made the home a place of conflict for everyone.

Eventually God remembered Rachel and He blessed her with a child, but not because of the mandrakes. When she cried out to God, He took mercy on her and gave her a son she named Joseph. Later on in the story we read that tragically Rachel died in giving birth to the last of Jacob's sons, Benjamin. This is recorded in Genesis 35. Ironically, she who wanted children so badly died as the fulfillment of her dream came true.

This story reminds us that being beautiful and even being loved doesn't solve all your problems. Just ask Rachel. She may have been the trophy wife, but she was a sad person, and envy dominated her married life.

## **II. The Unwanted Wife.**

Six of Jacob's sons were born to Leah. But Leah wasn't the wife Jacob really wanted. And in spite of his kindness to her, not even her ability to produce children could win Jacob's heart at first. In addition, the passage tells us that she wasn't very attractive. The text says that Leah had "weak eyes", which was a Hebrew euphemism for saying she wasn't pretty. Leah was sad because she wasn't attractive and because she wasn't loved or wanted.

Martin Luther once wrote: "...Leah sits sadly in her tent with her maid and spends her time spinning and weeping. The rest of the household, and especially Rachel, despises her because she has been scorned by her husband, who prefers Rachel....[Leah] is not beautiful, not pleasing. No....There the poor girl sits; no one pays any attention to her....These are truly carnal things in the saintly fathers and mothers, like the things that happen in our houses."<sup>1</sup>

Luther saw this story as a very modern tale we can all relate to, and I believe Leah is an accurate portrait of many women today. Many wives feel neglected and unloved by their husbands. Sometimes they haven't done anything to justify their husband's reaction, but sometimes, like Leah, they've also done a lot to contribute to their rejection. Being deceptive, having an attitude of bitterness, constantly nagging, struggling for power in the home – all these things will push couples away from each other.

Leah wasn't the wife Jacob thought he was getting when he got married. He thought he was marrying Rachel, and it was only the next morning after the wedding that he discovered Leah was his wife. It was the shock of his life!

At just about every wedding I've ever done, I notice that after the bride walks down the aisle and stands next to the groom, they always do the same thing. It is so subtle that most in the congregation miss it, but just about every couple does it. And since I have the best seat in the house at the wedding I can see it. They sneak a quick look into each other's eyes. It's only a glance. When they do that, I sometimes wonder about the moment that will come not long after the wedding when they will take a much harder look at their new spouse and wake up to the realization that this is not exactly the person they thought they were marrying. I know it happened to Lorie and me after we got married.

Isn't it curious how the smallest things become so important to us after we get married, and the personal habits of your spouse can drive you crazy? I remember when Lorie and I first got married the way little things started to matter a whole lot to me - like which way the toilet paper came off the roll, or whether the cap of the toothpaste was put back. You begin to realize that you're going to be with this person for the rest of your life, and small irritations become big ones when you think of living with them for a lifetime!

I think Rachel represents the spouse you thought you were getting, and Leah represents the spouse you really married – the spouse you wanted and the spouse you have. How do you and I move on from being stuck there? How do we bring resolution to this inner-conflict? That leads us to the last point I want you to consider this morning.

### **III. The Blessed Wife.**

In his book *Hustling God*, Craig Barnes<sup>2</sup> suggests that whoever it is that you love, that person is both Rachel and Leah. You may love one more than the other, but they are actually wrapped into the same person. Rachel is the one you love, and you're sure that she will be the greatest blessing in your life. But you can't have Rachel without taking Leah, whom you don't love, and frankly, didn't think you were getting. It isn't long after you are together that you discover you didn't just get Rachel; you are also very involved with Leah. And most couples spend a lifetime trying to turn Leah into Rachel. This tension between the love you want and the love you have is as hard for women as it is for men.

John Ortberg writes in one of his books, "When life does not turn out the way you had planned, the option of quitting will always begin to look like sweet relief....Someone once asked a desert father named Abba Anthony, 'What must one do to please God?' The first two pieces of advice were expected: Always be aware of God's presence, and always obey God's Word. But the third was surprising, 'Wherever you find yourself, do not easily leave.' The idea was that community is hard, authentic friendship is hard, patience in work is hard – so leaving will always look more attractive in the short run. But over the long haul, leaving easily has a tendency to produce people who live in a pattern of giving up. Do not easily leave."<sup>3</sup>

If we're faithful to hang in there in our marriages, if we do not easily leave, and if we seek the grace and power of God to change us more than we ask Him to change our spouse or our situation, a wonderful blessing and a wonderful transformation can take place in our hearts.

There's a powerful epilogue to the story of Jacob's relationship with Rachel and Leah. The Bible tells us that after Jacob had been married to both women for many years, and after his great struggle with receiving God's blessing had come to a climax later in his life, he finally saw the blessing of being married to Leah.

We're told later on in the book of Genesis that while Jacob was traveling from Bethel to Bethlehem, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. This is recorded in Genesis 35. When she died, Jacob simply buried her in a grave along the way and then continued on his journey. It was as if he was finally able to leave behind the trophy wife. However, when Leah died, Jacob had her buried in the family plot along with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and right next to the place

where his own body would eventually rest. In the end, Jacob chose to see Leah through the eyes of God.

It takes time to recognize the blessing God has given you. More importantly, it takes seeing God in a new way, for until you have lost your dreams wrestling with God, you do not understand and you will never be free to receive the blessing the Lord is trying to give you in the spouse who is right in front of you.

### **Conclusion.**

I close with this. Karl and Jan had been members of their church for less than a year, but they threw themselves immediately into the life of the church, signing up for several committees and ministries. One night, tragically, during a mission committee meeting at the church, Karl had a massive heart attack and died. In a moment, Jan's life completely changed.

The first few months she was numb with the shock of it all, but gradually she worked through the stages of her grief and came to a place of peace. She still missed Karl very much, because he had been such a blessing to her, despite the problems they had in their marriage like all couples do.

One Sunday morning, she saw a young couple having an argument in the parking lot after church. She couldn't tell exactly what they were fighting about, but she knew it couldn't be that important. Like every couple, Jan and Karl had had plenty of these little fights. They seemed so ridiculous to her now, and it drove her crazy to watch this couple. She told a friend the next week that she wanted to run up to the couple and say to them, "Cut it out! Don't waste time doing this! Do you realize what you've got? It could all be gone tomorrow!"<sup>4</sup>

Do we realize what we've got in relationships we have, or do we take them for granted? Maybe we need to learn the lessons of this passage in Genesis so we can see and cultivate the gift of God in the people He has put in our lives so that we can honor them for the blessing they are, despite their shortcomings. I think it's a matter of perspective, and it's a matter of grace. He is a faithful God for a fallen people, and He can heal our marriages and our broken relationships if we yield our lives to God and let Him. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 5:314.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, *Hustling God*, p. 76,77. Much of this section of the sermon is adapted from Craig's insights.

<sup>3</sup> John Ortberg, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out of the Boat*, pp. 103,104.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from a story Craig tells in his book, pp. 73,74.