

8th Sunday after Pentecost

“Switcheroo”

30 July 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Genesis 29:15-28

Today’s text is the story of Jacob’s marriage to his uncle Laban’s two daughters—Jacob’s cousins. The Genesis account relates Jacob’s twenty years in Haran: his marriages and service to Laban, the birth of eleven sons (not Benjamin), and finally his plotting to return home (29:1—31:55). The goal of Jacob’s story is to convey God’s promises to Abraham and Isaac to later generations via Jacob (35:9-12). Today’s lesson pertains to securing a proper wife for Jacob. Certainly, this story seems foreign, what with multiple wives and near kinfolk at that. But let’s put the story’s cultural difficulties aside and hear the lesson:

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 (Genesis 29:15-28).

This lesson needs a bit of explanation. First, in the Ancient Near East, marriage had little to do with romance, although our writer provides a bit. Mainly, however, marriage was an economic fact of life. It answered such questions as: “How does our society provide for people? How do people eat and find shelter for themselves and their children?” Thus, earlier at the well (29:9-12), when Jacob noticed the beautiful Rachel, he not only saw her loveliness. He also regarded her fine-looking flock. In the ancient world, sheep on the hoof was the equivalent to a modern stack of Kruegerands. Thus, Jacob loved Rachel and Jacob loved all she brought to a marriage opportunity.

Second, in Africa for example, polygamy is a way of life. Multiple wives have little to do with sexuality and everything to do with economics. In some African cultures, there are at times two to six women per husband. Why do African women accept this arrangement? At the marriage age, there are often many more women than men. Females survive birth at a higher rate and, between war and hunting accidents, young men die at a much higher rate. In Africa, women value children more than anything and motherhood is a high goal. For this reason, women will willingly share a husband, if he provides children, food, and shelter. Today because gender numbers are more constant, and education levels are rising, polygamy is waning.

A third textual issue is confusion over which daughter Jacob married first. In a Sunday school class years ago someone said, “I paid a lot of attention at my wedding. I’m surprised Jacob did not know who he was marrying.” But in the Ancient Near East weddings were massive parties that lasted for weeks—and the couple was kept apart. Because people traveled long distances, they often camped and reveled for a long time. Wedding celebrations looked something like our “family reunions,” only they lasted longer. During the gaiety, the wedded couple retired to the wedding tent. The groom entered first and waited for the bride. Then the bride’s family brought her to the tent with a veil hiding her face. In those days, no couple honeymooned in the Bahamas or Hawaii. The couple’s honeymoon was in center of other family tents. Only in dawn’s light would one see well enough to make out a face. Few newlyweds knew each other before the wedding night and this is why Jacob found out later that he married the wrong sister.

Jacob then agreed to marry Rachel for seven additional years of labor because he did not have enough money to pay the bride price. Remember marriage is mostly an economic matter and especially so in Laban’s case. When Jacob exposed Laban’s

swindle he wanted an account. Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” This situation stunned Jacob. What would you have done if someone cheated you the way Laban seemed to cheat Jacob?

Has anyone ever cheated you?

Do you remember what it felt like?

If you had been in Jacob’s shoes, what do you think you would have done?

Of course, those who know Jacob’s track record regarding his own wheeling and dealing may say that Jacob got what he deserved, but I would like to address a different question about Jacob’s situation. Are you devoted enough to work for fourteen long years for anyone or anything?

Jacob had a choice. He could either do what he did. Or, Jacob could have simply walked away from the situation. Mostly, Jacob had wounded pride and pride often keeps us from coming to terms with life, ourselves, and with others. For this reason, theology identifies pride as one of “the seven deadly sins.” Pride makes us do things we know that we should not do. Did you hear about the clever salesperson that closed hundreds of sales with this line: “Let me show you something several of your neighbors said you couldn’t afford?”

This story about Jacob tells us something substantial. When we love something or someone, God empowers us to devote ourselves to it. Some might call it the pursuit of excellence. With respect to our faith, it is no different. If we devote ourselves to God in Christ, we are freed to muster the strength and perseverance to be the best person of faith we can be.

Has anything like Jacob’s story happened in today’s world? Would someone work 14 years for someone they love? Gladys Kidd offered to work for the husband she loved. On 2 May 1962, a dramatic ad appeared in *The San Francisco Examiner*:

I don’t want my husband to die in the gas chamber for a crime he did not commit. I will therefore offer my services for 10 years as a cook, maid, or housekeeper for any leading attorney who will defend him and bring about his vindication.

A San Francisco's attorney, Vincent Hallinan, read the ad and contacted Gladys Kidd, who had placed it. The court was about to try her husband, Robert Lee Kidd, for the slaying of an elderly antique dealer. Investigators found Kidd's fingerprints on a bloodstained ornate sword in the victim's shop. During the trial, Hallinan proved that the sword was not the murder weapon. Kidd's fingerprints and blood got there because Kidd and a friend had playfully dueled with the sword while in the store. The jury, after 11 hours, found Kidd not guilty. Attorney Hallinan refused Gladys Kidd's offer of 10 years' servitude (From the *Book of Lists* #2, p. 157). Mrs. Kidd offered herself as a modern Jacob. She loved her husband and believed in his innocence enough to put her life on the line. For Christ's sake, can we do less? Amen.

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