

Competing for Attention

Genesis 29:15-30

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Today the lectionary brings us one of the funniest and strangest stories in the Holy Bible. Jacob was now living among his mother's people, her brother Laban and his daughters. Laban had two daughters. The eldest was Leah. She was a "nice girl. Good personality." But Rachel was beautiful. And Jacob loved Rachel.

When Jacob arrived in the land, he was waiting at the well for the water to be drawn. That's when Rachel appeared. Something of a show off, when Jacob saw Rachel, he jumped up and in a sign of manly strength, rolled the stone away from the well. Jacob watered Rachel's flock and then grabbed her and kissed her.

Laban seemed glad to have a kinsman around, but old Laban was crafty. Maybe he thought, "This strong young man will sure come in handy." So, after a month of watching Jacob, Laban made him an offer. "You are a kinsman and shouldn't work for me for nothing. Name your wages!"

Young Jacob knew what he wanted. He wanted Rachel. So he said excitedly, "I'll work for seven years if you give me Rachel." Laban liked the bargain and agreed to it. So Jacob worked seven years. He was so lovestruck that it only seemed like a few, short days.

Once the seven years were complete, Jacob was ready. He went to Laban and basically said, "Give me my wife so that I can have sex with her!" though our English translations dress his language up a little bit. So, Laban plans a wedding feast and invites all the people from the land to be his guest. They celebrate and have a good time. Laban makes sure that Jacob has enjoyed the wine he's purchased for the occasion. When evening comes, Jacob is drunk and goes to bed with his new wife.

The next morning the sun breaks through the windows. Jacob has a little bit of a headache, but he rolls over to cuddle up next to his beautiful Rachel and screams, waking everyone in the house. For Laban has pulled a fast one. Jacob has married and slept with Leah! Jacob comes running out of the bedroom, half-naked and encounters Laban. Jacob cries, "What have you done to me!" Laban sits quietly and looks at Jacob matter-of-factly, "We don't do such things in *this* land, didn't you know? We don't give the younger daughter before the oldest has been married. But here's what I'll do. Complete the week of wedding celebration for this one, and then I'll give you the other one. In return, you work for me another seven years."

What is Jacob to do? Rachel is the one he really desires, so he agrees. A week later, he is married to Rachel whom he loves.

Poor Leah, however. She is unloved, and God sees it. God looks at the situation and realizes that Rachel has beauty and love, what does Leah have? So, God opens Leah's womb and she has a son.

Leah shouts with exultation, "God saw my affliction; surely now my husband will love me." Then, she gets pregnant again. "Because the Lord heard me; I've been given this son also." She has a third son. "Now this time Jacob will be joined to me." But, alas, it is not so. Four sons Leah bears and Jacob still loves Rachel.

Rachel is now furious. She screams at Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob indignantly cries back, "I'm not God!" Rachel realizes what she needs to do. Jacob keeps sleeping with Leah because she is giving him sons. Rachel knows what will appeal to Jacob. "Jacob," she says, "Here is my maid Bilhah. Why don't you have sex with her. If she has sons, then they will be mine." It doesn't take much to convince Jacob, and so Bilhah bears two sons. After the second one Rachel celebrates, "With mighty wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister and I have won!"

Leah realizes what she needs to do to get back into this game. "Jacob," she says, "I too have a maid. Why don't you have sex with her." Well, Jacob definitely seems to be enjoying himself. Two more sons are born.

Well, by this time you've got a bunch of kids running around. The oldest son, Reuben, is growing up. He now realizes what's going on in his family. Like a good son, he wants to help his mother Leah get ahead. While out harvesting the wheat, Reuben notices mandrakes, an aphrodisiac. Reuben takes the roots and brings them to his mother, but Rachel sees what he's doing.

In recent weeks, Jacob had been staying in Rachel's bed, but she is still unable to get pregnant. After seeing Reuben and the mandrakes, she realizes that it is now time to bargain with her sister. First she tries being nice and simply asking for some mandrakes. But Leah will have none of it. Leah looks at Rachel and says sternly, "You have stolen my husband from me. Now you want to take this gift from my son?" Rachel realizes she must strike the hard bargain. "If I let Jacob sleep with you tonight, will you give me mandrakes?" Leah looks hard at her sister and agrees.

Jacob comes in from the field and is heading to Rachel's to clean up, when Leah encounters him. Leah is tired of trying seduction and romance. She gets straight to the point. "You have to come to my bed tonight. I have hired you in exchange for my son's mandrakes." The result: Leah has two more sons and a daughter, Dinah. After this sixth son of hers, Leah says, "Now my husband will honour me." But her wish is in vain.

Just as God saw Leah's need and blessed her with a child, God now looks upon Rachel's need and opens her womb. Rachel has a son. "God has taken away my shame," she says. "Now give me another son!"

What a story. And what a mess things are in! Genesis began with blessing. God looked out on creation and said that it was "very good." But then things went awry. Adam and Eve disobeyed. Cain murdered Abel. Ultimately God called Abraham and said that from his family all the earth would be blessed.

But so far in Genesis this family doesn't seem to have learned some basic principles of blessing. The men don't seem to know how to treat the women. Even the women fight with one another and hurt each other. The privileged continue to mistreat the oppressed. Children are put at risk. And siblings fight with one another.

Envy got in the way of Leah and Rachel's relationship. Creighton professor Bruce Malina

writes that envy arises when we perceive that there are limited resources to go around. In this particular case, for Leah and Rachel there wasn't enough love and attention from Jacob to go around. Or, to put it more generally, they perceived blessing itself to be a limited resource that they must compete for.

This family's inability to treat each other well affects each new generation.

Yes, this story of the women competing for Jacob's sexual attention is funny -- it is intended to be funny. But the dark truth of the story is that this family is unable to be the blessing to the world that God originally envisioned when God called Abraham. This family still hasn't learned how to bless each other.

And if we take a moment to think about it, many of us -- maybe most of us -- have had some experience with family that has fallen short of the ideal. The Rev. Michael Piazza writes that functional families are those where we learn honesty, intimacy, and trust, but, unfortunately for most of us the family is "the last place we learn to do those things."

This particular family has become locked in unhealthy emotional processes that keep repeating themselves over the generations. All families have these sorts of processes, healthy and unhealthy. Psychologists have learned that often the issues that individuals are dealing with are a reflection of their wider family systems. We clergy are taught that this is true of congregations as well.

Families can be most wounding because they are the root of our identity and personhood. Our parents and siblings, in particular, have great power over whether we feel loved, trusted, respected, and approved or the opposites of those.

Some unhealthy family processes include passive aggressive communication, scapegoating, triangulation, shaming, verbal or physical abuse. Many people feel that they must perform in certain ways or be a certain type of person to gain their family's approval. Whenever someone acts against the family system, particularly if they try to transcend it or become healthier, the system responds by trying to return to homeostasis and draw the person back into the unhealthy processes. This is often how hurtful conflict occurs in a family.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman wrote the classic on family systems and emphasized that the path to health for the individual and the family involves self-differentiation:

Differentiation means the capacity of a family member to define his or her own life's goals and values apart from surrounding togetherness pressures.

Neither Leah nor Rachel were capable of defining their worth apart from their role in the family system. And, I must admit, that it is probably much easier in the contemporary world where the individual has greater freedom of choice for the roles they will inhabit in life.

Rabbi Friedman is clear that differentiation does not mean separating from the family, but, instead, remaining part of the family while working on one's own life goals. It means developing strengths rather than staying focused on weaknesses. He writes that this will ultimately "bring more fundamental healing to the entire family."

The gay and lesbian community has contributed an important new concept to discussions of family. Because we often encountered complicated relationships with birth

families, gays and lesbians developed new forms of family and the concept of a "Family of Choice." This concept now seems to function more broadly, for many people are in relationship with individuals whom they consider to be "family."

Mike Piazza describes the family of choice as "those people who enrich our lives rather than just those with whom we share some common genetic material." He continues, "The ideal family which God dreams of for each of us is made up of individuals who know us and love us as we are, not as they wish us to be."

This gives us insight to one of the primary ways to overcome unhealthy family processes and that is unconditional love. Instead of setting rules for who a person must be or what they must do in order to be approved, the family who welcomes everyone to the table is a healthier family. Maybe this is a lesson that the church helps us with, because at church we encounter diverse people and must learn to get along with them. Hopefully our motto "No matter who you are, or where you are in life's journey, you are welcome here," is a motto which you put into practice beyond these walls.

This ideal family would be one where everyone is pursuing their own life goals, and thereby they support our self-differentiation. This ideal family is very unlike the one we encounter here in Genesis. This Genesis family keeps competing for attention as if there is not enough love and approval to share with everyone. Unlike the family in Genesis, the ideal family is one that has learned that there is enough blessing to go around.

The final stanza of our opening hymn has reminded us that

Not alone we conquer, not alone we fall;
In each loss or triumph, lose or triumph all.
Bound by God's far purpose in one living whole,
Move we on together to the shining goal.

It is a lesson of unity, welcome, acceptance, and love that our families must learn. A lesson that we must put into practice in our own families -- there is enough blessing to go around.

As we put this lesson into practice, may the closing lines of our final hymn be our prayer and call to action:

Bind us close to one another,
Sharing life and death and birth,
Welcoming as sister, brother,
All your children on the earth.