

“Bait and Switch”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
26 July 2020*

Genesis 29:15-28

¹⁵Then 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. ²¹Then 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.

This week we continue the story of Jacob, he of the checkered history, the questionable behavior, the last con, but also the man who recognized the presence of God in his life, who struck out on a new path, who was the third of the Patriarchs. His story is rich, operatic in scale, but it is also the stuff of farce. And here it is, in all its glory. Whoever said the Bible was just a bunch of boring rules clearly didn’t read or just forgot today’s lesson from Genesis. In it the con man is conned, the cheater is cheated, and we are left to scratch our heads and wonder what is going on in this story of double-crosses and bad faith.

Ultimately, we wonder, where is God in all of this?

Before we can answer this question, we need to offer some stipulations, so we can move ahead with a consideration of this passage.

First, this story is probably 2,700 years old. It was not written for 21st-century Americans and their particular mores and perspectives.

Second, there are things going on in this story that we would consider to be wrong, to be beastly, to be beyond the pale. The women are treated as an afterthought, the approach

to marriage is transactional, and the family relationships are epically flawed. We are rightly appalled.

Third, this story comes from very early in the Jewish tradition. It is worth noting that the marriage of Jacob to Leah and then Rachel violates the Levitical prohibition on just such an arrangement, which is expressly forbidden in Leviticus 18:18, part of a long list of taboo sexual behaviors. This violation points to the evolution of thinking and morals, even in ancient times, but more on that later.

Jacob has returned to the land of his forebears, to Haran, and there he meets his mother's brother, his uncle Laban. Though Laban appears to welcome Jacob warmly, his attitude quickly is revealed to be darker, more calculating. The talk of paying wages for work, while seemingly reasonable to our ears, would have been offensive in ancient times, as if one were spitting on family ties. But Laban is just warming up. When Jacob confesses his love for Rachel and offers to work seven years to earn her hand in marriage, Laban agrees.

Now, bartering one's daughter for another's labor is heinous, but things were done differently way back then, and we need to accept that—remembering that in doing so, we are not giving our approval. No, what would have galled the ancient audience, just as it does us, is that on the night of Jacob's long-awaited nuptials to his beloved, Laban pulls a bait and switch and substitutes Leah for her sister. Jacob consummates the relationship and, of course, is stunned when he learns what has happened.

Some of you might be thinking the trickster was tricked. And it is true. Jacob was. But even setting aside different moral codes, what Laban had done was horrible. He was concerned only with getting what he wanted, and he did not care if others were used or hurt by his actions. He hid behind a supposed norm of his day and homeland: the younger daughter may not be married off before an elder sister. Which begs the question: why hadn't Laban apprised Jacob of this fact *seven years earlier? Before he entered into the agreement?*

We know that Jacob was shocked and anguished. But what of Rachel? And what of Leah? We can only imagine the betrayal, the humiliation, the pain they each must have experienced.

And it wasn't to end there, was it? For Laban was now willing to let Jacob marry Rachel—for another seven year's labor.

Laban was bad news, in any time, in any day, by any recognizable standard of social conduct. Yes, we're supposed to recognize that just as Jacob had deceived his father, he had now been deceived by his mother's brother. But there is something grubbier, something truly unseemly about what Laban has done. We know it. The Bible's original audience knew it. And Jacob knew it. Yet he agreed to Laban's terms because he loved Rachel and wished to be married to her.

One of the challenges inherent in today's passage is that it is part of a longer narrative, one that includes the birth of Jacob's children—who had four mothers, Leah, Rachel, and their two maids, Bilhah and Zilpah—and his eventual departure from Laban's lands, which Laban wanted to prevent. The narrative also presents references to superstitious practices, false gods, and—here is the point of the story that this is all building up to—God's faithfulness to Jacob and Laban's recognition of this reality. Jacob finally returns, a wealthy man with a large family, to his future in Canaan.

Left only with this excerpt from the full story, we may find it harder to discern what Scripture is trying to tell us. But that may ultimately be for the good, as we must think harder and read more attentively.

One of our responsibilities as people who claim to be guided by the witness of Scripture is to know what it says, to look at the entire canon and not just pick and choose the parts we like, and, with faith and diligence, to engage with the good, the bad, and the perplexing in this ancient text.

We know that sensibilities changed over the years, and early too, so that by the time Leviticus was written, what had transpired in the Jacob story was no longer allowed: incest in its various forms was forbidden. But what is striking about the Bible is that older stories in which proscribed behavior occurred were not expunged but left in. It is obviously not possible to know exactly what motivated the editors of Scripture as they redacted the texts over the centuries, but we can hope that they were driven by their faith. Perhaps they knew that the past was best not forgotten but examined, that the history of Israel was populated by women and men who were fallen, in whatever way that was understood, and that their descendants should know of what they were made. Since we Christians claim to be heirs to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this includes us. We, too, are imperfect and must grapple with that truth.

Still, even looking at Scripture in context, it seems remarkable that the story of Jacob was included as it was. There were not only what we deem to be retrograde relations between the sexes but also the wholly dysfunctional family life that people experienced. None of this makes sense to us.

One of the reasons that people are depicted as acting differently in the past is that they were different from us, or at least the way they saw and understood themselves was different. Harold Bloom, the late, great literary critic and scholar, wrote a book entitled *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. In it Bloom essentially argues that Shakespeare created our modern sense of human nature through his plays and their characters. He had done what had not been done before. In many ways, this is what Scripture did, too.

Throughout the centuries over which the Bible was written and collected into the form we know today, truly new ideas about God and humanity arose. Reading the Bible, we

can draw parallels with other ancient religions, find cognates of Yahweh in other Near Eastern belief systems, read of commonly held myths like the flood story. But upon further scrutiny, we find the differences are more profound and fundamental than the similarities: The Hebrew Bible diverges from other ancient texts in showing the care that the deity has for his creatures, God's preference for the poor and powerless, and the evolving insistence on God's universality and singular nature.

We see this evolution from the pages of the Torah, with its passing references in Genesis to the Heavenly Court and the implication that the God of Israel was one among many divine beings, to the later, exclusivist contention in Isaiah that the God of Israel was the only god, period.

I don't know that the people who edited and assembled the Biblical canon had intended to show this evolving understanding of God or changes in human morality, but they are there nonetheless. I believe that offers us a lesson that we must constantly learn and re-learn: the past is real, it is tangible, and as William Faulkner famously observed, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

We have been reminded of this in recent months, as we re-examine our past and try to understand how it might have shaped our present and thus enable us to move forward into the future. As practitioners of Christianity, we are participants in a faith that has a linear understanding of time, that sees things going from point A to point B, though not always taking the most direct route there. This is something we see in the story of Jacob. One could argue that he left home only to return. But that argument would deny what he learned along the way, and what we learn from this journey.

Marriage has been a transactional business for much of history, not just in the time of the Bible. We see that in the depiction of Laban, who clearly was concerned about how he could benefit from marrying off his daughters. But we see something else in Jacob, who loved Rachel, and whose love for her endured throughout the years. That commitment was remarkable. And so, too, was Rachel's. As I noted earlier, the way she was treated was seen as wrong long ago. The midrash, the ancient Jewish commentary on the Bible, argues that she knew what her father planned to do on the night of her wedding to Jacob, and rather than allow her sister to be humiliated, she arranged for the union to proceed. We might question this action, but we cannot deny her love and concern for her sister.

So, yes, things were done differently in the past. Were we to write this story today, Jacob might have rejected Laban's insistence on Leah's having a claim to marriage based on her age, or Rachel would have insisted that she and Jacob elope. We can imagine all sorts of scenarios, all sorts of ways to evade the bait and switch.

But that is not the point. The bait and switch in this story serves a purpose, allowing us to see how Jacob's past has come back to haunt him, and enabling us to dwell on how unfair that is, not only to him but to innocent others, including Rachel and Leah.

As the Jacob-Laban story comes to a close at the end of chapter 31, and the narrative action shifts to what happens next, we are left with an impression of two worlds: that of God and that of humans. The former is represented by Jacob, the latter by Laban. The former is grounded in an unbreakable promise, the latter in chicanery and double dealing. Jacob is not a perfect man, not in any way, but he is willing to learn, and as he matures, he is willing to assume his responsibilities. To get what he wants, he will take on obligations and duties he did not seek. Laban, however, was trying to cut a deal until the end, and one is left with the impression that he agrees to draw a line between Jacob and himself, so that his son-and-law and his God will no longer meddle with his life and his priorities. Jacob is willing to change and grow, while Laban is not.

And so, yes, God is present throughout this story, not as an intervening deity who will make all things right, but as a loyal and steadfast presence who will not forget the promises he has made. Jacob had come to know his God, and Laban seems to have come, at least grudgingly, to recognize his existence, too.

This story reminds us that the Bible was not written or handed down over the ages to satisfy our own personal or societal agendas. Instead, it is a witness to the one true God of Israel, the one we believe came to us in Jesus and gave us the Holy Spirit. Though Jewish and Christian readings are at odds over this principle, they share in common the belief and the assertion that Creation exists because of the decision and actions of a beneficent deity, and that it is the purpose of God's creature to offer God thanks and praise.

That, then, is the bait and switch of which we need to be aware: that rather than hear the authentic message of Scripture, we will be distracted and instead replace it with our own messages and concerns. Those things are not all bad; often times they are laudable. But they should be seen in the right light, within the context of God's creation, God's will, and God's desire for us all. Then they can be made holy, and in pursuing them, we will glorify God.