

Sermon

Sunday, November 18, 2018

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Genesis 29:15-28, Matthew 13:31-35, 44-52

Unrelenting, Unshakable Unwavering Love

The Rev. Al Zadig, Jr.

Twenty-three years ago, my wife and I were married in a service that had some technical issues. First, my mother was 30 minutes late. The Acolyte drops the Ciborium, that silver container that holds all the wafers for communion. The ciborium bounces on the marble floor, making a thundering bang. But the biggest challenge to our wedding? Our designated preacher forgets to show up! Certainly, we had many clergy participating in the service, including my father, as well as the rector of that church, and a gaggle of my seminary friends. As the clock ticked to 7pm with no preacher, picture the church: packed, incense is everywhere, and five hundred people are in the pews, looking back with eyes saying, get going! Which may be why, when in response to my asking the clergy present to preach, all said, "Not on your life!" All that is, but one - Howard Peckenpaugh, known as Peck. The service goes forward, and we all breathe a sigh of relief. All is fine, until the sermon. Peck begins well, using great hand gestures to make the analogy that marriage is like a big trapeze act, with two acrobats swinging together.

He says, "Marriage like a trapeze act is full of," and he forgets what he wants to say. Total silence, hands still in the air. So, like an airplane resetting for another takeoff, off he goes again. "Marriage like a trapeze act is full of." Silence. Third time, "Marriage like a trapeze act is full of," which is when he says it - Disillusionment. You could kind of hear the air going out of the sanctuary in that moment. Peck would later say yeah Al, I think I used the wrong word there. Disillusionment.

I can say twenty-three years later that Peck was absolutely and totally wrong. Even Jacob from Genesis 29 would disagree with Peck! Genesis 29 is a love story par-excellence that quite frankly would make a great Hallmark, Life-time movie. There is no disillusionment with Jacob when he sets his eyes on the beautiful Rachel, whom the Bible says is beautiful in form and appearance.

But let me back up a bit. As we track with the Gospel Project, you know where we've been with Jacob, but let me give a quick review. Jacob started out as a real deceiving crook, a

liar, and a con man. He deceives his twin brother out of his birthright, and his blind father out of the first-born blessing. So, estranged from both, he runs away. But, as you remember from last week, Jacob has a conversion of sorts through the Jacob's ladder vision, where God gives him a vision of grace and affirms his love for him, and his descendants. After waking up, Jacob, still estranged, continues on his way to visit relatives on his mother's side of the family. And that's when Hollywood hits the hills of the Middle East. Jacob arrives at a well in the middle of a field, when all of a sudden Rachel walks up. Jacob's jaw drops. She's the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Jacob falls in love immediately and hard. Her beauty matches the meaning of her name, Rachel means ewe-lamb. Jacob knows she's the one for him, but he has one significant problem. Jacob is broke. An important detail because it was the custom of the day for a man to present a gift of money to the family of his future wife. And so Jacob, in exchange for money, says to Rachel's father Laban, "Let me work for you for seven years." Men?

Could you see yourself making that kind of an offer? What we see here is a "whatever it takes" kind of love. As proof, after the seven years are over, Jacob ramps up the romance saying, "The years only seemed like days because of the depth of my love for my Rachel!"

We know the rest of the story. All is set for the wedding of the century. Laban is about to fulfill his promise. Rachel is being measured for her wedding gown. Jacob lines up his groomsmen and honeymoon plans. The wedding feast comes and goes. They have their first night together. All is amazing, but, they wake up to a total bombshell disaster! Laban deceives Jacob by sending in older sister Leah to the marriage bed. Now, it's logical to say, "Wait a minute, how on earth could Jacob miss this? Really, waking up to the wrong sister? Keep in mind, the night before would have been pitch-black dark, no artificial lights anywhere. Leah would have been wearing all the veils & vestments of a betrothed woman, including the facial coverings. And of course, Jacob would have had probably an excess of liquid refreshments. Imagine the hooting and hollering the next

morning! But forget about Jacob's anger for a minute. Can you picture Rachel's anger? Dad, get me out of this locked room to the marriage bed with my husband! I think we just elevated this story to HBO! Jacob flies out of bed, terrified, feeling nauseous, like he's living out some kind of sci-fi nightmare. He runs to Laban to unleash his fury of rage, demanding, between large heaving breaths, "I served my time. How could you deceive me?" Laban's calmness rattles Jacob. Laban, with the emotion of a head librarian, says in utter calmness, "It is not our custom to have the younger daughter marry before the eldest daughter. Good day, oh, and by the way, if you finish the marriage process with Leah, then I will give you Rachel's hand in marriage, if that is you work another seven years!"

Who ever said the Old Testament is boring! Out of this adoring love, Jacob waits another seven years and would take Rachel's hand in marriage. Suffice it to say, Jacob's love for Rachel is absolutely unrelenting, unshakable, and totally unwavering! Fourteen years he would wait to put that ring on Rachel's finger. Fourteen years not just of waiting, but fourteen years of backbreaking hard labor, fourteen years of humble obedience dying to self! Fourteen years of trying to navigate between Leah and Rachel.

So, let's zero in on Jacob for a minute. It's hard to get the image of Jacob as deceiver out of our heads. We might even think he gets what he deserves. But my friends, Jacob, for all his broken-ness, would always be known as one of the great Patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Which tells us that God uses broken people to accomplish His will. It means we can never tell God, "O dear Lord, you could never use the likes of me, who am I anyway?" But its deeper than that, something more profound is going on here. Here is another way to look at Jacob. Jacob as an empty-handed vulnerable suitor, willing to bind himself into service and do whatever else it takes, including dying to self, to win the hand of the one he loves, relentlessly. Does this sound like anyone in the New Testament? Jesus? Empty-handed vulnerable suitor, willing to bind himself into service and do whatever else it takes, including

dying, to win the hand of humanity, relentlessly.

Jacob loves Rachel so much he works fourteen years to prove it. Jesus loves us so much, he lives 33 years of servanthood and endures hours of suffering on the cross to prove it. Both die to their own selves, Jacob through time, Jesus literally with his life. Yearning for you, me, ourselves, our souls, our bodies? Could we be the Rachel in this story? Could Jesus be the Jacob? Unrelentingly after us? My friends, is it hard for you to imagine Jesus pursuing you like this? Is it hard for you to imagine Jesus unrelentingly loving you like this? Isn't this the point of the words of Jesus in today's Gospel from Matthew? "The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls, when he finds one of great value, he went and sold all he had and bought that field." My friends, you need to know you are the pearl! You are the one God have His only son for! That not one would be lost. The loveless loved. The unlovable adored. And I have proof.

There is another woman in this Genesis love story. The beautiful Rachel has an older sister Leah. Poor Leah. Her eyesight is off. Not as attractive. In fact, her name, yikes, the name Leah means cow, for goodness sakes. More than anything, it's one sentence that crushes her. Genesis 29:18: Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. Have you ever been on the receiving end of rejection? For Leah, its more than rejection. Rejection by one you've had children with is perhaps the most painful kind of rejection. Have you been there? If you're there now, know this. God is the father to the fatherless, the lover of the love-less and there is no stopping Him. Genesis tells us this about God's heart. His plan for us, his love for us will never ever be thwarted by human deception or rejection.

Case in point. When God sees that Leah is unloved, he does something fascinating. God, we are told, opens her womb and Leah, the unloved wife of Jacob, would have the privilege of HAVING babies. And not just any babies. Here's the miracle. It would be through Leah's line that Jesus Christ, the one who himself out of unrelenting love, would die for us that we might live. Yes, Leah's son Judah would produce the line of King David, King Solomon, and Jesus Christ. The unrelenting love of God would not be derailed. No betrayal, deception, Jacob, Laban, or Judas could hold God's plan back. Which should tell you that God's plan is so powerful not even our own betrayals, deceptions, divorce, and mistakes can hold God's plan back! The unrelenting love of God in Jesus is greater than any human endeavor good or ill. A love unique to Christianity alone. In Buddhism and atheism, there is no God to love us in our failures. In Islam, Allah doesn't love the unbelievers. But in Christianity, Jesus dies even for the ones who hate, deceive, and reject Him! Which tells us

that God doesn't love us for who we are or what we have done or left undone. God loves us for who He is. It is His character to love this way! Is it hard for you to imagine Jesus unrelentingly loving you like this?

Let me apply this to your life with a fact and two questions. Fact: Like Jacob pursuing Rachel, Jesus is relentlessly pursuing you like GPS Maps. You can run, but you can't hide. Like that GPS map on your phone, once you plug in your destination, you can drive into infinity by driving the wrong direction and what will that GPS do? Number one, it relentlessly never gives up on you. You can drive for fourteen years, seventy years, and all you will hear relentlessly is one word – recalculating. Take the next right. Take the next left. Relentlessly! Jesus, like your GPS, will never-never-never give up on you. There is nothing dis-illuminating about the relentless love of Jesus! His plan will prevail! That's a fact!

First question: Have you accepted that love? Like a bride to a bridegroom, have you ever said, "I do." I receive your love Jesus into the deepest place of my soul. Live in my heart.

Second question: With that kind of unrelenting love, can you love others as Jesus loves you? For Jacob, for Jesus, something had to die in here to love like that. Lord let me die to my sin, my hurts, my own betrayals to love like you. Holy Spirit come in and help me love relentlessly like you. Loving unrelentingly to love the unlovable, unshakably to love the unstable, and unwaveringly to love the wavering! Your test? Your Thanksgiving Day table. Can you unrelentingly love each person as a pearl of great price as Jesus loves you? My friends, is it hard for you to imagine Jesus pursuing you like this? Is it hard for you to imagine Jesus unrelentingly loving you like this, so that you love others the same way?

Finally, years ago, an Anglican Abbot announces to his monks he would be preaching that night on "The Love of God." As the shadows fall and the light ceases to come in through the windows of the monastery, the monks gather in the darkness of the altar. The Abbot lights a candle and carries it to the crucifix, the cross with Jesus on it. First, the Abbot illumines the crown of thorns around the head of Jesus. Next, the two wounded hands of Jesus. Then the marks of the spear wound in the side of Jesus. In the hush that falls, The Abbot blows out the candle and leaves the sanctuary. There was nothing else to say. The unrelenting, unshakable, unwavering love of Christ.