

Pentecost 8 / July 26, 2020

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Opening Prayer: Faithful God, we have gathered in hope to worship you this day trusting that you will instruct and guide us just as you did our ancestors. Open our hearts, ears, and minds to hear your message of grace for us this day. Amen.

I always feel for Leah in this Genesis text. I really find it difficult to absorb what happens to her in this story. I don't like it. I think this story really gets under my skin because there is something about it that feels the same way as overhearing the boys in my junior high make a shy girl the butt of their crass joke.

Every time I encounter this story, I just have such empathy for Leah. Sure, the whole story reeks of unfairness! If taken out of context of the broader story in Genesis, people would likely really feel for Jacob here!

After all he makes a promise that he keeps, believing in the agreed upon terms, and Laban doesn't keep the contract. I've heard plenty of sermons preached about the unfairness towards Jacob, and even the faithfulness of Jacob to stick it out for so many years to marry Rachel. But today, I really just see Leah in this story and I wonder what God has to show us through her.

See, Jacob LOVED loved Rachel. He adored her. He was wild about her. And he worked a solid seven years to earn her. And so, on his wedding night, he goes to bed with who he assumes is Rachel, only to roll over the next morning and find Leah there instead!

Now- every woman I know that has ever read this story does not find this humorous, but the way the Hebrew writers and storytellers tell it, does make it a humorous situation.

Remember, that Jacob is notorious for being a pretty big weasel himself- the one that tricked his

brother out of his inheritance over a bowl of soup and who covered himself in goat hair to trick his blind and dying father in order to steal the blessing too!

So here, Jacob, the weasel that he is, had the wool pulled over his eyes. He was getting what he dished out. And I can just imagine, before this was written down, men sitting around telling stories of their forefathers over a few pints, and everyone leaning in and pausing just at the moment when the storyteller takes the turn from the night of the wedding, to the morning afterward, to deliver the punchline—“and it was Leah!”

Big laughs all around! Elbows nudging one another, swigs taken...

But it wasn't very funny to Leah.

Leah who serves as the “get one” in this BOGO deal from Laban, her own father.

Leah, the elder sister, who was used as a surprise attack in order to get a husband. She was part of a bargain she had no say in making, to marry a husband who very clearly didn't want her.

But, like every woman in all of history, she did what she could with the circumstances. She spent the early years of this dual marriage trying to get Jacob to love her like he loved Rachel. In the ancient world, a woman's worth was very often tied to whether she had children, and sons specifically. Now, we don't get to that part here, but Rachel is barren, and Leah is fruitful. She doesn't just give him one son- she gives him FOUR- one after the other. Each time, she voices her hope that *this* son will change her husband's heart, but each time, the newborn son doesn't seem to change Jacob's preference for Rachel.

But at the birth of her fourth son, Judah, she realizes whose love she *can* rely on. “This time I will praise the Lord,” she says. She doesn't mention Jacob. She realizes after all that striving, after all that work to try to get Jacob's love, that God was there for her the whole time, **unconditionally.**

I would love to believe that none of you know what it's like to be in a situation where you've had to try to earn someone's affection, but I know that it is an all too present part of many of our stories. I know I've experienced it, and it feels just plain awful. Maybe, for you, it wasn't so much earning someone's affection, but maybe just their acceptance?

—into the family, into the friends group, into the social circle, into a new community? When we have to work to be accepted, it makes it that much harder to feel like we belong. When we have to work to be accepted, it means that acceptance can be taken away too. It's nerve wracking because our acceptance is conditional. And, if we are honest, we can admit we don't just have it happen to us. We do this to others, too. We put conditions on who we love and who we find acceptable *all the time*, and it's not just who we accept in our close social circles.

Our whole society puts conditions on who is accepted and who's not, conditions on who is truly loved and who is not:

You may be poor, but upon condition that you have never made a wrong decision that might have led you into poverty.

You may be Muslim, but upon condition that you leave your faith at home.

You may be from another country, upon condition that you have everything in order before you flee from your oppressive government in order to save your life.

You may be young upon condition that you don't try to change anything.

You may be old upon condition that you don't hold onto your traditions too much.

You may be on the left or the right upon condition that you will always be construed as only far left or far right.

You may be a woman, or gay, or black, or brown upon condition that you don't complain too much when you aren't treated as a whole person.

I'm sure we can each name our own conditioned way of being that we can personally testify to.

But see, when we do that- when we put these conditions on others (because, hey they are put on us all the time, so why not?) we have a maddening tendency to assume God holds the same conditions over us. We are told we are made in the image of God, and when we live lives loving others like this- loving others conditionally- over time it trains us to believe that is how God loves us too: "God loves you unconditionally, but conditions apply."

We easily assume that God will love me if I follow the commandments.

God will love me if I go to church.

God will love me if I vote blue or if I vote red.

God will love me if...

Lucas and I have a friend who grew up in a little charismatic church in the mountains of North Carolina. It was the kind of church that reminds everyone that the fires of hell brazenly await you and anyone else who doesn't follow God's law. It was the kind of church where you may be baptized, but that was no assurance of salvation. "Backsliding" was a mortal sin, and it terrorized this friend for years. It was full-on "God will love you if and only if."

But what if there aren't any checkboxes? What if there aren't any conditions? The same God who created you also redeemed you. The God who redeemed you is abundant and lavish, reckless even, with grace!

In the parable of the mustard seed, we see an unloved part of creation, growing wildly, serving God's purpose of providing shelter for birds. We see a woman hiding leaven into flour to make it dough, enough dough to make bread for a hundred or more people. We see a merchant

and a land speculator throw away their life's earnings for a single thing they know is more precious than anything they had previously.

Selling everything for a pearl; recklessly throwing away everything to claim buried treasure—these aren't the actions of a measured and reasonable person. They're not the way we're supposed to act. You don't give up your livelihood, and you certainly don't throw all your eggs in one basket. But God does.

God gave up everything, becoming human, taking on the sins of all of humanity, because of the prize that would win—you. You are the treasure in a field. You are the pearl of great value. And God has thrown it all on the line for you.

So why would God, who became flesh to die on a cross for our sake, turn around and put conditions on that unhinged, reckless grace? God has no end of grace, no end of mercy, no end of love for you specifically, **and** for the whole world. God laughs at us for thinking there is something we can do that will undo the mercy God has already shown us, as if our sin is somehow more capable of separating us from the love of God than God's mercy is at bringing us right home into that love.

Your salvation is a done deal. God's love for you is unwavering. You are a precious pearl that has already been bought, a buried treasure that has already been claimed. God has taken you, as Leah, just as you are, not demanding you first become Rachel before you can be loved, not assigning you value based on the fertility of your womb, not desiring you to always feel second best.

God spoke through Isaiah on this: "You [as you are] are precious and holy in my sight, and I love you." (Isaiah 43:4) And through Paul, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all

of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” And this love, this mercy, this unconditional grace poured onto us by our irresponsibly, lavishly, recklessly majestic and loving God, changes who we are.

If God didn’t withhold the Son from the cross, what should keep us from loving others with the same reckless abandon? If God came to us while we were still in the depths of the quagmire of sin and death, what should keep us from diving into the brokenness of the world to find those lost and forsaken by the world? If our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob- the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah- THE God Almighty doesn’t put conditions on the love God absolutely pours onto us, what boldness must we have to put conditions on our love for others?

Might Leah’s story of a God who loved her JUST AS SHE WAS be the God that we see, hear, and follow. May we believe that each of us are loved, just as we are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.