

## It Was the Worst of Times; It Was the Best of Times?

First Reading Genesis 29:15-28

<sup>15</sup>Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” <sup>16</sup>Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup>Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. <sup>18</sup>Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” <sup>19</sup>Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” <sup>20</sup>So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

<sup>21</sup>Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” <sup>22</sup>So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup>But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup>(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) <sup>25</sup>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?” <sup>26</sup>Laban said, “This is not done in our country — giving the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup>Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” <sup>28</sup>Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Well it’s mostly summer out. A little bit. I love summer. Summer- the season of swimming pools, the season of homemade ice cream. And, at least for pastors, summers is the wedding season, too. As Dave Backen mentioned last Sunday, a couple of Fridays ago we celebrated the fabulous wedding of Alex and her new husband Ryan.

And, I have to say I’ve been pretty lucky in the wedding department. The most stressful wedding I had the bride showed up late and the couple had a dog as a ring bearer- but it was at a beautiful lake and nobody cared she was late and the dog was the best behaved member of the wedding party. Another one that really didn’t go that well was an outdoor wedding in Austin- it had rained the night before and all of the bridesmaids were wearing these dagger like stilettos that just completely sank into the grass; and it turns out the ceremony was right in the flight path

of the Austin airport. So every couple of minutes a jet would fly over, and I'd be in the middle of something, and then I'd have to pause until the plane had passed.

But this is nothing compared to the stories my friends tell- the no show bride/groom, the drunk groom who vomited on bride who no doubt wished she had been a no show bride. And they go on and on.

But the worst stories my friends tell- even THEY still pale in comparison to what has to be the WORST wedding in the Bible- the wedding of Jacob and Rachel.

So, things were already not going that well for Jacob. Jacob is the kid who was always full of mischief. When he was younger he decided it wasn't fair that his older brother Esau was supposed to inherit everything. Why should Esau, this big, hairy, knuckle dragging mouth breather get all of his father's inheritance and blessing, when clever Jacob, charming and good-looking Jacob should get nothing? So, one day when Esau was out in the field working and hunting all day, Jacob was hanging around making this amazing smelling porridge. And when Esau lumbered up absolutely famished Jacob said- "Oh, I'm so sorry, we're all out. This is the last bowl." And when Esau moans, Jacob says, "You know what big brother. Just to show you my hearts in the right place- I'm willing to let you have this bowl...in exchange for your birthright, i.e. inheritance." Esau, not being the brightest bulb in the lamp, agreed. So for a bowl of porridge Jacob secured his claim to his father's house and property.

Then, later, when Isaac was wanting to pass on his blessing to Esau, now the least he could do - he was calling for his boy. But Jacob, with mom's help, puts fake hair on his arms

and disguised his voice to sound like Esau- and he goes in and Isaac lays his hands on him and passes on the blessing to Jacob instead of his brother. But when Esau figures out what Jacob has done, he flies into a rage, and with literally nothing left to lose, he decides to fit Jacob for a pair of cement shoes.

And so Jacob flees- he flees to his uncle's land in Haran, all the way back where Abraham and Sarah started out from. It's really a pretty terrible time for him. But, as it almost always seems to happen with charming scoundrels like Jacob, even when he's on the run and down for the count- he lucks his way into something good. When he gets to Haran he's hanging out at the well, kind of the hang out for everyone, and he sees this girl approach- and she is beautiful. I mean he can't keep his eyes from her, and, seeing this handsome stranger, she returns his gaze as hungrily as he does. And, Bible world being a VERY small place, of course it turns out that this beautiful girl is exactly the girl Jacob is looking for- for she is Rebekah, his uncle Laban's daughter. (And, the science of genetics not being QUITE as advanced back then as today- marrying family was considered FAR superior than marrying some outsider.)

Well it was a whirlwind romance. Laban received Jacob into his own home- bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. And after only a month, a month, Laban asks the boy what he wants in return for working for him. And Jacob, never missing an opportunity, says I want to marry your daughter, Rachel. We're in love. Love- after a stolen kiss at the community well, and a month of living in the same house. But what Jacob didn't know is that Laban was even craftier than he was. And Laban seeing how lovestruck the boy is says "Deal! You work for me for seven years, and you can marry my daughter."

And so for seven years Jacob does whatever Laban tells him to do. He fetches the water. He takes care of the sheep. He keeps the cattle. He makes deals for Laban. And Laban is LOVING this- just sitting back having this brilliant, crafty young guy doing all the things he used to be doing.

And then finally the seven years are up- and Jacob and Rachel have been counting the days. They had done all the pre-marital counseling, they had the flowers all picked out, the china patterns, the cake, the photographer- everything. And when night fell and the torches were lit and wedding feast began- basically this week long bacchanalia- Laban giggled, patting himself on the back for having the BEST idea of his life. Laban, having made sure Jacob had plenty of libations the party, then, before the boy staggered to his honeymoon suite, Laban had swapped out daughters. And through the haze of rich wine and the thick darkness of night- Jacob didn't even notice.

So in the morning, as Jacob was no doubt rubbing his head wondering what hit him- he rolled over to see not Rachel lying next to him...but Leah????!! And Jacob tears out of the tent, putting a robe on we hope, and he finds Laban eating his wheaties and reading the Haran Times with a smug look on his face. "What have you done to me?" Jacob roars. Did I not serve you for Rachel? And you- you gave me Leah? You tricked me!

Laban, not even looking up from his paper said, "You know, son, we just don't do that in our country- give away the younger daughter before the eldest. I'm sorry- didn't I mention that?" And then, folding the paper careful and laying it on the table in front of him he looked at Jacob directly in the eyes. "Give me another seven years and Rachel is yours."

And Jacob the con man, now knowing what it felt like to be on the other side of the deal, knew he was beat. And he did another seven years before finally getting to marry Rachel.

Now honestly, if you know a worse wedding story- I'm all ears. The father of the bride, switching out one daughter for the other, and the groom not actually noticing until the morning...I mean it's gonna take a LONG time before the family can laugh about that one.

But, you know what I've been thinking about this week- as bad as this is, and it is bad, it's horrible. It's bad for Jacob, it's unimaginable for Leah and Rachel. But as bad as it is- eventually, in the fullness of time, it takes both Rachel and Leah, as well as both of their maidservants, to issue forth the twelve sons who eventually lead and give rise to the twelve tribes of Israel. Without this terrible, terrible wedding- this wonderful thing just wouldn't have happened.

Given enough perspective, the times for us that are the hardest can out to bear amazing, unexpected fruit.

I think that's what Paul was getting at when he wrote those famous words: "We know that all things work together for good for those love God."

I will confess to you this is not one of my favorite lines in the Bible- in fact it's a line I have particularly disliked for a long, long time. I have experienced people using this line as a device to shut others down when they are going through a hard time. A person starts to finally

say something honest about something painful- and then a Christian who is uncomfortable with pain just has to swoop in and say: “Well you know- all things work for good for those who love God.” \

Except this isn't what Paul is meaning. He isn't telling people to deny reality and pretend everything is great. He isn't telling people to close their eyes to what's really going on and stick their fingers in their ears: “La-la-la.” Paul, who has suffered jail, public beatings, and who wasn't trusted by Jews or Christians- Paul wrote from the very midst of suffering. When he says all things work for good- he's opening up my favorite words from Paul, words we say every week: “Who will separate us from the love of God? Hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril- or the sword?”

When Paul writes all things work for good- he isn't denying awful things, truly awful things happen every single day. What he's saying is that faith is about learning how to step back when these things happen, learning how to step back and acknowledge both the pain of what is happening- but also the possibility. The possibility that if God is truly God- then some of our hardest moments might still, one day, be capable of bearing unexpected fruit.

So, when Melis and I got married we decided why take our time? We graduated college, got married, and immediately proceeded to move from Austin, Texas to Princeton, NJ. And on top of all that, we decided we didn't have enough going on, and so that's when Rigby, our beautiful black lab, entered into our lives.

Now, friends, if you are ever given the chance to move a woman from Austin, Texas to New Jersey, and this move is going to be because of you, it's your fault- I would recommend you think twice about it. Maybe three times.

Melis worked for ExxonMobil about an hour North of Princeton on Route 1. It was a charming little area, the facility being flanked, if you will pardon the expression, with two strip clubs. One of them during Christmas set up this festive tower of used tires they decorated with lights. The other was a bit more classy- it was called Cheeques.

Fortunately, when Melis came back home to the beauty of Princeton, she came back to our apartment that was still blessed with the original pepto bismal pink tub, toilet, and sink. And we noticed that in the storage space in the basement everyone had these wooden palettes set up- we didn't know why until the first rain storm came and the whole place filled up with over an inch of standing water. Needless to say I got down there in a hurry to try and save what I could.

But hey, at least school on my end was going great, right? My first experience with Princeton was during the visit I had- I remember walking into a professor's office just to introduce myself and ask a few questions. She was sitting at her desk, her head staring down at whatever she was working on. When I knocked, she didn't look up- she just said, "Yes." And I explained I was visiting and had read one of her books and just wanted to say hello. This time she at least looked up, her sharp eyes flickering, "Come back during office hours- they're posted on the door. Good day." I left, completely dumbfounded.

My next experience was with the registrar- a famous woman who had been there for about 150 years. Judy was one of those folks who believed if paper and pencil was good enough

when she started- it was good enough forever. To do registration every single literally had to filed into her office, sit down with a prepared piece of paper requesting classes, and then she would go cross check what you wanted to take against this huge book.

I told her I was interested in taking a class with this professor over at the University. She narrowed her eyes at me, and she snapped: “Did you go to a public or private university?” “Uh...public.” “Well, I think you’ll find you have quite enough on your plate with the seminary. Why, don’t we think about other classes a little later, hmm?” Again, I walked away completely and thoroughly bewildered.

But surely at least classes were going well, right? I’m a sharp guy. Well, we didn’t get any grades back until the middle of the term. The first paper that came back was in Church History- and when Joe handed it back to me, I looked at it and thought he must have given me the wrong paper. It had this weird red symbol on the top of the page that I have never seen on one of my papers- it looked strangely like a C+.

I was in his office the the next day, in an absolute state. Melis wasn’t happy. This place wasn’t friendly. And I had to maintain a 3.5 to keep my scholarship, and I got a C+??? I was a total wreck. And then he caved and told me that they always gave all the juniors, the first year seminarians, C’s for the first paper- just to throw a scare into us he said. He told me not to worry- that he was sure I’d probably do just fine.

It was easily one of the worst times, the hardest times in my life.

But, I also learned more than I ever thought possible. And not just academic learning- but being thrown into pastoral situations, praying with families in hospitals, and literally growing

into a different kind of person, a kinder person, a more thoughtful person, a person who might actually make a decent pastor some day.

I sure wouldn't want to go through all of that again. And I'm not sure everything was entirely necessary- I think I could have grown just fine without the pink bathroom for instance. But the point is with time, with perspective- I can't but admit that one of the hardest times in my life, was also, in hindsight, one of the most formational.