

TWO FOR ONE
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Genesis 29: 15-28 (NEB)

Laban said to Jacob, “Why should you work for me for nothing simply because you are my kinsman? Tell me what your wages ought to be.” Now Laban had two daughters: the elder was called Leah, and the younger Rachel. Leah was dull eyed, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel and he said, “I will work seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban replied, “It is better that I should give her to you than to anyone else; stay with me.” So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, and they seemed like a few days because he loved her. Then Jacob said to Laban, “I have served my time. Give me my wife so that we may sleep together.” So Laban gathered all the men of the place together and gave a feast. In the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob slept with her. At the same time Laban gave his slave girl Zilpah to his daughter Leah. But when morning came, Jacob saw that it was Leah and said to Laban, “What have you done to me? Did I not work for Rachel? Why have you deceived me?” Laban answered, “In our country it is not right to give the younger sister in marriage before the elder. Go through with the seven days’ feast for the elder, and the younger shall be given you in return for a further seven years’ work.” Jacob agreed, and completed the seven days for Leah.

Then Laban gave Jacob his daughter Rachel as wife; and he gave his slave-girl Bilhah to serve his daughter Rachel.

I do not watch so-called “reality TV.” I have seen commercials for them and I presume they include such programs as “The Bachelorette,” a forlorn and often jilted woman who changes hair color as often as she changes boyfriends. There are many others such as “The Apprentice,” “Dancing with the Stars,” and so on. It appears that reality TV is taking over the industry.

There was a program called “Fear Factor.” Contestants are pitted against one another facing various physical obstacles and challenges that included eating of various disgusting animals such as a camel spider. Participants often wind up in the mud or rivers or pits of awful ooze. Well, I am not sure I would eat a camel spider, but I do not think it would be as frightening as thinking that you were going to bed a

beautiful and graceful woman named Rachel only to wake up to her “dull-eyed” sister, Leah. I know of other dull-eyed creatures. Sharks come to mind.

You remember our friend, Jacob, of course. I spoke about him a few weeks ago, recalling how he tricked his brother, Esau, out of his rightful inheritance and the blessings of his father Isaac. Now, it seems, that the tables have been turned. And if you were to read the remainder of this chapter and the several that follow you would discover a family that is constantly in contest with one another. Leah is not stupid. She realizes that Jacob does not love her. Genesis declares that even when “the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he granted her a child, but Rachel was childless.” Leah gives birth to several boys, hoping that with each son Jacob would love her. Their names reveal the deep longing of Leah to be loved. First there was Reuben, meaning “See – a son;” then there was Simeon, meaning “Hearing,” third was Levi, meaning “Union;” and finally the fourth, Judah, meaning “Praise.” Jacob, do you not see me? Do you not see your own flesh and blood? Do you not hear the sound of your boy’s laughter? Are you ignorant of the interminable bonds of union in which our family is now gathered? Can you not give praise for these precious gifts that God has blessed us with?

Rachel understands the consequences of these offspring. By the laws of primogeniture Leah’s first born, Reuben, will be the inheritor of Jacob’s estate. But she hopes that she could bear a son for Jacob. Her hope turns to anger and self-pity. “Give me sons or I shall die,” she declares. (I bet you never hear that on “Jersey Shores.”) Jacob is shocked by this desperate utterance of the graceful and beautiful woman. Jacob thunders, “Who can take the place of God?” In guilty response Rachel

gives to Jacob her slave girl Bilhah and says, "Lie with her, so that she may bear sons to be laid upon my knees, and through her I too may build us a family." (You did not realize that surrogate mothers have been around so long did you?)

We're not done yet. Bilhah conceives Dan, meaning "He has given judgment." Rachel again sends her slave girl to Jacob who produces Naphtali, meaning Trickery. She thought to herself, "I have played a trick on my sister." Well, this goes on and on until finally, at last, Rachel gives birth to her son, Joseph.

Reality TV has nothing on the Bible in terms of skullduggery, sex, deceit, bitter family feud, double crossing, cat fighting, and trouble with the in-laws.

The twelve sons that are produced out of this dysfunctional family become, of course, the twelve tribes of Israel. The stories, therefore, are not so much represented as the history of a family, but the story of a nation. It is the lore of the human family. It tells us something about human nature and the lengths we will go to secure our future. Within every extended family system is this grinding determination to manipulate the future to our own ends.

We are something like the six year old who comes crying to his Mother because his little sister pulled his hair.

"Don't be angry," the Mother says. "Your little sister doesn't realize that pulling hair hurts."

A short while later, there's more crying, and the Mother goes to investigate.

This time the sister is bawling and her brother says, "She knows now."¹

¹ Funny Stuff, "Sibling Fight," <http://funny-stuff.3961608.n2.nabble.com/Sibling-Fight-td3182564.html>. Downloaded 7/23/11.

It is a fact of life that human beings act out of self-interest. This reality is inescapable. Some would argue that even our most noble and altruistic actions bear at least the seeds of self-concern or self-protection. Self-interest is at once the physical need to survive and at the same time requires emotional and social satisfaction. Our biological being seeks food and shelter and sexual relations. Our souls require a sense of security through family and community.

Self-interest is not a judgment upon humanity. I do not speak from some distorted sense of Biblical ire. It is just the way things are for all of God's creatures. Every community organizer, legislator, minister, teacher, and social worker cannot effectively and efficiently do his or her job without a rich appreciation for self-interest. If you want to change something in your family or community you need to figure out what self-interests are represented at the table.

There is a marked difference between self-interest and self-centeredness. When the self becomes the center of our universe we are not of much use to the rest of society. In fact, we are a danger to community. Now this is just common horse sense. Let me explain. Many people think that the alpha stallion dominates a herd of horses. That is not true. Forget what you have seen on TV or films like "The Man from Snowy River." In fact the alpha stallion usually lives on the periphery of the herd and often follows the herd, marking the trail with his scent and pushing stragglers along. He will, of course, defend the herd and fight for the role of sire. But the real leader of a herd of horses is the "boss mare." She is the one who determines when it is time for the herd to move on and the direction it will take. The lead mare is responsible for the general safety of the herd and enforces discipline. The worst form of punishment for a

horse, and it is usually a yearling or a two-year-old we are talking about, is shunning. A horse that gets to be too full of himself, nipping and biting, running the herd, and so on will be forced out of the herd. The youngster will be isolated until the lead mare thinks it is time to allow the wayward one to return.

Why does this form of discipline work? Shunning in a horse herd is effective because horses think of themselves as prey animals. My horses do not think of me as their good buddy but as a predator. Horses have three emotions – fear, fear, and fear. The only defense that horses have is the herd. A shunned horse is a vulnerable horse whose isolation could prove to be deadly. Self-centered behavior makes the whole herd vulnerable to attack and it is not tolerated. The same is true of human families and communities.

It is possible for human beings to be self-interested and acquire a healthy self-esteem, while at the same time be community centered. The problem with Jacob and his two wives is that each is totally self-absorbed. Jacob, Leah, and Rachel believes that he or she knows what is best for the future and attempts to exert control over the entire family, clan, and nation. Each is quite certain that he or she can manipulate the community to their own ends. Of course the end never quite looks like what they imagined. There are unforeseen consequences that none had planned on. But that will not deter them from scheming the next event to get ahead, or get even, or get rich quick. You can follow this story right out of the book of Genesis, through the entire Bible, and right on to the streets of Wichita, KS, July 24, 2011.

It is an extreme example, but consider Anders Breivik, the man who has confessed to detonating a bomb in the government building in Oslo and shooting

down young campers on a nearby island. The death toll this morning is 92. It is claimed that he belongs to a Christian fundamentalist hate group who is angry because he fears that Norway will enact Islamic Sharia laws, will not regulate the immigration of Arabic speaking people, and is certain that they will overpopulate his country. Breivik blames the government for these changes in his nation and decided to take matters into his own hands. He was somehow going to reshape the future of Norway, all by himself; according to his own singular vision; by the power of his own violent hands.

Is that not what Scott Roeder thought when he shot and killed Dr. George Tiller nearly two years ago? Mr. Roeder was certain that he knew better than anyone else the righteous moral track of women's reproductive rights. He was going to take the future of choice for women and fashion it on the anvil of his own hypocrisy.

The examples rumble on and on, like the mighty Mississippi River, all of greater or lesser tragedy. I see it all the time when youth make decisions that drastically narrow the horizon of their future. They believe that they are immune from consequences. I see it in husbands or wives who suddenly decide their marriage is going to take off in a whole new direction without consulting the other.

It was the pride of Jacob and Leah and Rachel that each believed he or she had been deigned by God to shape and control the future. But of course, the future always took a turn that they had not been foreseen. The unimaginable happened. The course of family events shuttered and rumbled as if there was another party in the mix, another player in the game. And that, of course, is the lesson of Genesis, of the entire Bible really.

The testimony of the Christian faith asserts that God's hand is yet the hand of history. Despite every idiotic plan by men or women to be masters of the universe Providence giggles and they are brought to their knees. When some tyrant rises to crush the freedom of children, women and men, the movement of freedom stirs somewhere out beyond the pale of oppressive imagination. It may take years and many may suffer, but the hand of God's justice grinds ever so finely.

If you read this text from Genesis Yahweh is always stirring the pot. Just when Jacob, or Leah, or Rachel thought they had cornered God on to their side the old wizard would think up some new potion to push conclusions beyond their mind's eye.

I think about the tyrants of Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and others across the world today. They never imagined that young people would really have the gall to stand up against them. They did not conceive of the technology that would shake the foundations of their gulags. Think about that. I can imagine Mubarak and Kadafi in hell, scratching their heads. "Hosni," says Moamar, "what brought you down?" "I don't know," says Kadafi. "All I heard was a little Twitter and here I am. And you?"

"Don't know either," replies Mubarak. "Barnes and Nobles suggested I read Facebook. Before you know it I am in hell."

I have been reading the complete speeches of Winston Churchill. On October 16, 1938 he delivered a speech entitled "Defence of Freedom and Peace." In that speech he stated, "Alexander the Great remarked that the people of Asia were slaves

because they had not learned to pronounce the word ‘NO.’”² They are learning that word now and the entire military and political make-up of the Middle East is about to change. Not all of it will be to the advantage of the United States in terms of security, natural resources, political and economic alliances.

My prayer is that such changes will be for the greater freedom of human beings throughout the Middle East. But we cannot know for sure. There will be much uncertainty and it may take years for any resolution. But I am certain of this: If new forms of oppression arise, and even take power for a time, a mysterious power will introduce new actors, new scenes, and a new chorus, changing the script forever. In the famous words of M.K. Gandhi, “When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it – always.”

There is something in the universe that checks the movement of myopic self-centeredness. There is a hope that is greater than our need to control and manipulate. There is a goodness that is richer than our presumed beneficence. There is a grace more sublime than the human stranglehold of power and influence. There is a kindness that far supercedes the wrath of violence. This is what I understand to be the love of and justice of God. And the best self-interested people I know live in the junction of God’s love and justice.

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² Winston S. Churchill, “Defence of Freedom and Peace,” *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897-1963*, Robert Rhodes James, ed. (London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), Vol. VI, p. 6016.