

July 30, 2017 – Leah & Rachel

Genesis 29:15-28

Last week, when we left Jacob, he had just set up a stone to mark a holy place, a place where Jacob had encountered God. If you remember, this encounter occurred while Jacob was on the run from his brother Esau. He was travelling to a place called Haran where Jacob was hoping to find refuge with his uncle, Laban. As we begin today's story, Jacob has already arrived at his destination and is staying with Laban and his daughters, Leah and Rachel.

One of the fascinating things about this story is the description that is provided for the two daughters. The younger daughter, Rachel, is described as lovely and graceful. Other translations of the bible use terms like beautiful, attractive and, well favoured. But the description for Leah talks only of her eyes and the Hebrew word that describes them is one that translators have argued over for centuries. Some say it means weak, delicate or tender while others say lovely or nice. Some even suggest that Leah's eyes were dull or plain. My favourite interpretation is found in a novel by Anita Diamant called *The Red Tent*. In Anita's version of the story, Leah's eyes are two different colours – "one blue as lapis and the other green as Egyptian grass" (page 11). Whatever that Hebrew word really means, we do know that the author is differentiating between the two women based on their appearance and we also know that Jacob has fallen in love with the lovely Rachel.

It seems that Jacob has settled in very quickly in Haran and has been working as a labourer for his uncle. A month has passed and Laban is starting to feel guilty that Jacob has been working for nothing. He says, "Why do you work for me without wages just because we are related? Tell me your worth, and I'll hire you." Jacob replies, "I will work for seven years for the hand of your younger daughter, Rachel."

It's important to realize that marriages in that time and place often involved a negotiation process that included a gift from the groom's family to the bride's father. Jacob had arrived at his uncle's penniless and he wasn't about to go back home and ask his father or brother for money. So, instead, he offered his labour as the betrothal payment and Laban gladly replied, "I would rather that she marry you than give her hand to another. I accept this offer."

So Jacob worked for seven years and the scripture tells us that he loved Rachel so much that to him, "it felt as if it were a few days." At the end of this time, there was a wedding feast with lots of drinking and then the official consummation of the marriage. Jacob went into the tent and Laban brought him his bride. The twist is, of course, that it was Leah that Jacob slept with. It wasn't until morning that Jacob realized he had been duped!

We could ask ourselves, "How did he not know the difference?" Was it that dark in the tent? Was he that drunk? Were the two women really that similar? Who knows! All we know is that Jacob seemed pretty upset the next morning when he

realized what had happened. He exclaimed, "What is it that you have done to me? ,, Why have you deceived me?" Laban's explanation was that "It is not our custom here to let the younger child marry first. Finish this wedding week with the elder and I will let you marry the younger for another seven years work." I don't expect that it happened quickly, but eventually Jacob settled down enough to agree to Laban's terms. When the week was finished Jacob and Rachel also got married.

So what is your reaction to this story? How do feel about what happened? Do you agree with Jacob, was he cheated? Do you think the resolution was fair? *(wait for answers)* Yes, Jacob was cheated and yes, Laban was a swindler and yes, it could be argued that Jacob got what he deserved. We could spend a long time talking about what is just and unjust in this situation.

But I'd like to spend some time focussing on the characters in the story who did not have a voice in these transactions. Who were they? *(wait for answer)* Yes, Leah and Rachel were the silent participants in this story. In fact, there were two other women also involved, Zilpah, who was given to Leah as her maid and Bilhah who was given to Rachel. None of them were asked if they were OK with the transactions that took place. None of them got to choose who they would sleep with, who they would marry. They were living in a different time and place, in a patriarchal world where women did not have a voice; where they did not have the freedom to choose their partners; where they were basically treated as property to be bought and sold.

Sometimes I wonder just how far we have come from that worldview. This week, I couldn't help but notice some of the headlines in the news:

- on Thursday there was a story out of Saskatoon about the past coercion of Indigenous women to undergo surgical sterilization. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/report-indigenous-women-coerced-tubal-ligations-1.4224286>
- on the same day we heard that the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women is now reviewing the conduct of police involved in the cases. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/mmiwg-police-investigations-1.4224318>
- we only have to go back a couple of weeks to find a story about anorexia – one of the ways that women suffer because of the emphasis in the media on the size and shape of our bodies <http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/eating-disorders-to-the-bone-netflix-1.4197351>

We don't have to look back much farther to find stories about inequality of salaries in the workplace, about domestic violence, about the lack of acknowledgement of the important work of stay-at-home moms, about the trafficking of women and girls for sex. And I haven't even mentioned what the Trump administration is attempting to do to our neighbours to the south.

Of course, there are positive changes being made:

- this week there was also a news story from the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN), telling us that 16 of the province's 74 chiefs are women. This is a record high. The

indigenous women in this province and in this country are beginning to find their voice. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/the-time-is-here-sask-has-record-number-of-female-first-nations-chiefs-1.4223231>

- We also know that both the federal and BC cabinets were recently created with gender balance. Women are increasingly speaking their truth in our governments.
- In April it was announced that Iceland would become the first country in the world to force companies to pay all their employees the same amount for the same work — regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality or nationality. <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-thursday-edition-1.4015885/iceland-set-to-become-world-s-first-country-to-require-equal-pay-1.4017483>

But even with these changes many women are still struggling to be heard.

Women in this country and in this world should not have to endure discriminatory practices like Leah and Rachel and Zilpah and Bilhah experienced over 3000 years ago.

It is up to us to add our voices to those who are working for justice and freedom for all in this country. May we remember those who have been silenced and speak out in whatever way we can in order to build God's promise of peace and justice for all.

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