

All Saints Pentecost 7A – Proper 12 – July 27, 2014

Rev. Dr. M. Michelle Woodhouse

In the Name of God. Amen

Good Morning!

Some of our most intriguing biblical narratives are grandparent stories. These are strands of oral tradition, supplying a portion of the fabric of the Book of Genesis, for example, which portray Jacob as an exemplar of faith. Other strands of ancient tradition describe this man, the father of the twelve tribal identities of Israel, as being a scandalous trickster.

The account in Genesis which tells about Jacob's brides, Leah and Rachel, is a grandparent story. Like all grandparent stories, this one is exceedingly interesting. It is sprinkled with pungent humor. It is embarrassingly candid.

Parental stories are usually pious and evasive. Grandparent stories are unpretentious and unadulterated. A friend shared with me what had occurred when his son sheepishly entered the house at midnight, reporting a dented fender. Immediately my friend exploded expounding upon his own pristine record as a teen-age driver and describing the fastidious care he had lavished upon his hard earned '57 Chevy driven throughout his college years. The son went to bed depressed and

compounded by guilt. At breakfast, however, his grandfather dropped by. With a compassionate arm over his grandson's shoulder and a twinkle in his eyes, Grandpa put this whole fender-bender matter into a broader perspective. "Did I ever tell you about the time your dad crashed into a State Patrol vehicle at an intersection? It was just after the Duke-Carolina game of '65. Wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't stashed all those six-packs in the back seat. Your dad was on probation until graduation. I've still got the receipts from our attorney. Want to see a copy of the court ruling?"

Grandparent stories are different! court rulings are kept in the family scrapbook, right next to the photographs of the children's first birthday parties. The fabric of life has the warp of failure and the woof of success. According to the Old Testament scholar, Terence Fretheim, this is precisely what was accomplished by the inclusion of the *Yahwist* tradition within the narrative of Genesis.

The scandalous side of the Jacob saga is told by the *Yahwist* with all the blemishes and warts in full view. If we read the stories with the ears of those for whom it was first written, we begin to hear the message with far more relevance. Most of those for whom Genesis was originally composed were Hebrew descendants of Leah and Jacob. Chapter 29 of

Genesis was their grandparent story. They traced their lineage through Jacob's second choice.

This story is an excursion from the larger narrative, but integral to the big picture of God's Covenant with Jacob. Despite Jacob's unwillingness to accept responsibility and his tendency toward deceit, God blessed Jacob and promised that he would become the father of a nation of descendants. But where would such fertility originate? Jacob had not chosen a wife. He was not getting any younger. He was a nomadic herdsman and could offer a woman no financial security or favorable future. Thus, he traveled east in search of a wife. At the well of Haran he encountered men who knew his uncle Laban, his mother's brother. These men introduced Jacob to Rachel, the radiantly beautiful daughter of Laban, who had come to water the family flock.

Here at the well, Jacob rolled aside a stone from the mouth of the well so that Rachel's flock could be watered. Rachel ran home and told her father Laban, who came running to greet his nephew.

So, when Jacob embraced Laban there was a rendezvous of two rascals. Jacob the trickster had met his match in Laban, the flim-flam artist of Haran.

Jacob stayed with Laban and fell madly in love with Laban's gorgeous

daughter, Rachel. Jacob would pay any price for the honor of having this woman as his bride. Jacob agreed to labor as a herdsman for Laban for seven years in order to pay the dowry for Rachel's hand in marriage.

Conveniently, Laban omitted a minor detail in his verbal contract with Jacob: he *neglected* to tell his nephew that, in this culture, the oldest daughter must be married first. So, upon the solemn moment of the wedding, surrounded by all of Laban's proud family, Jacob made his sacred promise to the woman who stood behind a veil at his side. His reward for seven hard years. The nuptial night passed and dawn broke into their bedroom chamber. At that moment of sober truth, Jacob suddenly gazed into the eyes of Leah. He was horrified!

The biblical text does not report that Leah was physically ugly. It only reports: "Leah's **eyes** were lovely." This description may be tantamount to the line often used today to describe a blind date, "She had a great personality." The Hebrew text quickly asserts, "Rachel was graceful and beautiful." Oral tradition has a way of bringing about a self-fulfilling prophecy. The Hebrew name Leah literally means "wild cow" or "gazelle." Leah was known by everyone in Haran as the old maid sister of the beautiful Rachel. On the other hand, Rachel was the Hebrew name designated for a cute "ewe lamb." Leah was clearly Jacob's second

choice. Apparently, she had been less favored by her parents from birth. The marriage added insult to her injury. Leah's lovely eyes gazed into the petrified face of a disappointed husband the morning after their wedding night.

Being a second choice always produces wounds. We only honor winners. As the iconoclastic comedian W. C. Fields once put it, "No one ever remembers numero two-0."

The spotlight of our biblical story now turns quickly away from Leah and illuminates Rachel. Jacob promised Laban he would serve him for another seven years if he would also give Rachel to him for his second wife. The verbal agreement was sort of a "marry now, pay later" plan. A wedding festival in the culture of Haran lasted a full week. So, as soon as the semi-celebration for the marriage of Leah and Jacob had ended, Jacob married his true love, Rachel. The tradition of the *Yahwist* is blatantly honest in reporting the fact: "So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years."

If there was ever a patron saint for those who feel like they have been disappointed by life, it is Leah. She is the patron saint, moreover, for all who know the feeling of being second choice. Leah the loser. One's

wedding is supposed to be the most magnificent moment in one's life.

But, by week's end, Jacob was in the arms of Leah's rival sister the cuddly ewe lamb who was always her parents' favorite. Leah was emotionally abandoned at birth and again upon the week of her wedding.

Leah is the prototype for evoking commiseration.

A candidate for crown prince of losers in our society is the playwright and actor, Woody Allen. Because of the insanity of his private life, Allen does not appear so funny anymore. we review the video, *Broadway Danny Rose*, for example, and we no longer laugh at the once hilarious lines. We see the pathetic personality of Allen himself. Danny Rose had an affinity for losers. He was a talent agent who always picked the worst acts in show business: a one-legged tap dancer, a one-armed juggler, "blind xylophone player, and a parrot who sang, "I Gotta Be Me."

When some of Danny Rose's acts became famous, they deserted him; for they did not want to be associated with a loser. In this film Woody Allen may have revealed his earnest desire to be rescued by the grace of some figure like Danny Rose who would offer unconditional acceptance to a perpetual and incurable loser.

Leah is like a patron saint whose story suggests just this form of grace.

She is like a Danielle Rose-a touch of grace for those whose roll of dice

is the fate of being second choice. Moreover, Leah was a primary matriarch of Israel. The descendants of Jacob became a paradoxical nation: the chosen people of God were constant victims of adversity. They became a nation of losers. Descendants of Jacob's twelve sons became slaves in Egypt. The biblical image of Leah, therefore, became a subtle and profound reminder of this fact. The biblical text makes it crystal clear that the promise of God to bless Jacob would have been made null and void had it not been for this *loser* Leah. This woman had a capacity for fertility. She gave birth to six of Jacob's sons, and one daughter. The text of Genesis, moreover, was the genealogical source book for the whole nation of Israel. Of the four sons born to Leah, she named three with references to Yahweh. Reuben literally meant "the Lord has looked upon my affliction." All the descendants of the tribe of Reuben throughout the centuries have worn with pride this badge of their identity. Simeon, son of Leah, was given a name which literally meant, "The Lord has heard that I am hated." When the people of Israel have been persecuted and treated as outcasts, the descendants of Simeon have elevated their proud tradition through Leah. A third child was named Judah: "I will praise the Lord." Thus, the honored delineation *Judaism, Jewish, or Jew* emerges from Leah's offspring. Judah was the

father of the tribe which presumably settled in Jerusalem and the southern kingdom. A fourth son, Levi, is associated with the Levitical traditions which defined and cultivated all temple worship. Most of the people who would be known as Israelites, therefore, claimed to belong to the lineage of Leah.

Leah's story is a grandparent narrative. It requires an adult mind to comprehend and appreciate it. The fertility of Rachel, was due to an agreement between the two sisters. They believed that the mandrake, a potato-like plant, possessed a property that stimulated conception. Through a bargain with Leah, mandrakes that were discovered by Leah's son Reuben, were shared with Rachel. So, by use of mandrakes from Leah, Rachel finally gave birth to a child-Joseph. God's promise to Jacob was fulfilled and exceeded!

Rachel was loved most profoundly by Jacob. But she died early due to the birth of Benjamin was buried near Bethlehem. Leah grew in Jacob's favor throughout their long lives together. She was buried with him in Hebron, near Jerusalem. In the same place with Abraham and Sarah, along with Isaac and Rebekah. The tomb is visited even today as a holy shrine for Jews, Moslems, and Christians. Through Leah the loser, all the peoples of the earth have been blessed!

Now this is truly a grandparent story. Descendants of Leah look upon her with gratitude and admiration. In this patient matriarch, there is enacted a theology of hope. The doors of history are opened through a promise and a future fulfillment for all losers who abide in the faith. The future of us all is being shaped by a providential God who sees beyond our limitations toward the horizon of our divine possibilities. Yes, God's magnificent plan is being fulfilled through winners like Rachel. But it is also being realized through losers like Leah. We all are integral to God's glorious purpose. God takes initiative in the lives of winners and losers. To be second choice is also to be chosen.

There is a true story of a certain couple who wanted to have a baby, but failed. They tried to adopt a child, but their age was prohibitive. About the time they had reached a point of despair, the wife became pregnant. She exercised extreme caution throughout the pregnancy. When the doctor delivered the baby, he quickly summoned the father for advice. The mother was doing fine. But the baby was deformed, having a stump where the right arm should have been. The father and doctor wrapped the child so that the mother, in this initial moment, would see only the face. When the long-awaited child was handed to her, the mother pulled away the blanket. She saw the truth.

This baby was not a pretty sight. After a brief silence, the mother spoke gently with conviction, "God knew how much we needed her, and God must have known how much she needed us."

We, who are gathered here today, are winners and losers. We are fashioned by our Creator with varying degrees of physical beauty, grace, and charm. But, whether we are at the top of the list or at the bottom of the list, we are all chosen by God. God's eternal plan cannot work without us. That is the gospel, according to the Old Testament story of Leah.

By the way, there came from the tribe of one of Leah's sons, Judah, a very special child. He was born in the tiny Judean village called Bethlehem. And, have you heard? he is the Savior of the whole world.

So, now you know the rest of the story.

Or is it simply the end of the beginning?

Like a mustard seed?

AMEN