

A PERFECT LIFE
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
July 27, 2008

Genesis 29:15-30

Somewhere along the way somebody or other had to decide on the stories that would be put in the Bible. Actually it was probably several somebodies, over a period of many years, who made the decision as to which passages would be a part of holy scripture.

Suppose for a minute that you had been a part of the selection committee. You had the responsibility of deciding which passages would go in the Bible. What sorts of passages would you choose? Well, you would probably choose passages that mention God—this is the Holy Bible, after all. You might choose passages that tell of people doing religious things like going to worship or praying. Or you might choose passages about people who would set a good example for the rest of us—people who feed the hungry, say, or care for their neighbor.

If those are the kinds of passages we would choose, then let's consider the passage we read today from Genesis. How good a job does this passage do in meeting our criteria? As a matter of fact, it does a terrible job! It doesn't have any of the qualities we would look for in a good Bible story. The name of God is not mentioned. There's not a church or a temple in sight. And as for upstanding moral figures, you can hardly find a less moral pair than the two adversaries of this text: Jacob and his uncle Laban. What a couple of tricksters!

Jacob you remember. He was the younger twin brother of Esau, the one who tricked him and his blind father Isaac out of the blessing by fooling poor ol' Isaac into thinking he was Esau. Jacob had to flee for his life when Esau found out about it, for Esau had said: "I'm going to kill him." Jacob fled back to the old homeland, to the land of his uncle Laban. Jacob is a trickster, but in Laban he meets his match.

Laban: I tell you who he reminds me of is Vito Corleone in “The Godfather.” (“I’ll make him a deal he can’t refuse.”) He is cunning, manipulative, and always on the lookout for the next big deal. When Jacob arrives, Laban gives him a big hug. But you can bet at the same time he’s patting him down to locate his wallet.

After Jacob has been there for awhile working for his uncle, Jacob makes a mistake: he falls in love. The object of his affection is Rachel, Laban’s daughter, and the usually restrained Hebrew text goes bonkers over her. In various translations she is described as “stunningly beautiful,”¹ as “shapely and beautiful,”² as “beautiful in face and figure.”³ I’m sorry we don’t have a picture.

Jacob is completely swept away and asks Laban for her hand in marriage. Laban, always thinking, sees an opportunity. See, Laban has another, older daughter named Leah. Leah is apparently not as ravishing as Rachel. She is described as having “beautiful eyes,” but the Hebrew word is uncertain, and some translations have it as “weak eyes.” In any event, she is not the marriageable material that Rachel is. So on the day of the wedding, Laban acts. He presents the bride, demurely covered with a veil. Only Jacob, who has probably been into the pre-wedding wine, is not seeing too clearly, and after the wedding takes Leah back to his tent. In the morning he wakes up, and it’s Leah!

Jacob knows immediately that this matrimonial version of the old shell game has been perpetrated by Laban, so he goes to him and complains. Well, says Laban, you can’t marry off the younger sister before the older (which is ironic, since Jacob had earlier gone to all that trouble to pull the switch with his older brother). But, says Laban, I’ll tell you what: You agree to work for me another seven years, and you can have Rachel, too.

(Just as an aside, we note that Leah and Rachel are not consulted in these transactions at all. Later on they will turn out to have full and rich personalities, but here they are treated like cattle to be bought and sold.)

So Jacob agrees to the bargain, and after the honeymoon week with Leah is over, he marries Rachel as well, and then goes on to work for Laban another seven years. End of story.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.

² Today’s English Version

³ The Revised English Bible.

We like to think of the Bible as the word of God, as a guide to our lives, as “life’s little instruction book” full of things to help us in our lives. But there is nothing pious or morally upstanding here. There’s nothing here that makes this a “religious” story. Instead, it is a real situation of real people getting into a fix, and figuring out how best to get out of it.

That’s the way it goes with these stories of the patriarchs in Genesis. At the beginning of these stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God makes a promise to bless them, so that all of the nations of the earth will be blessed by them and their descendants. And what sort of job do these great patriarchs do in caring for this promise? They do a terrible job!

Here’s old Abraham and Sarah, too old to have a son but having one anyway. And then Abraham decides God is telling him to take his son up on top of the mountain and kill him. Here’s Isaac, too weak to do his own courting, so that a servant has to meet his wife for him. Here’s Jacob, grasping, tricking, lying, cheating.

You know what? I find it strangely comforting, this mess that they make of things. It is comforting, because this is the way it sometimes goes in our lives. We think that our lives are supposed to be perfect—perfect marriage, perfect children, perfect job, perfect health. And guess what? They’re not. There’s nothing perfect about our lives. Behind our facades and smiles and pretending, there are secrets and shames, tricks and manipulations, all of it as we try the best we can to make our way through life. Like, well, old Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

We talk reverently about the family values in the Bible. Well, don’t look at Genesis when you talk that way. These families are a mess.

And it’s not just Genesis. The Bible seems to be a book that upsets our usual notions of piety and perfection. Here is Jesus dealing with the sorts of people that offended the religious people of his day: prostitutes and beggars, the unwashed and unclean. His stories are not especially religious stories, but stories about life: a kid taking his father’s inheritance and blowing it all in a far country; a bunch of workers standing in line to get paid; even a manager who does some dishonest trickery when he is about to get the ax. That guy is not so different from the trickery we see in Laban and Jacob.

Yet we might ask: What has happened to the promise of God all this time? Remember? “I will bless those who bless you, and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” Here is what happens to it—it is still there. God’s name may not be mentioned

in this story, but God's presence hovers over all that happens. It is as if God takes all this craziness, and continues to move the promise forward.

Here is Leah. Jacob did not intend to marry her. It was a mistake, a trick on the part of father-in-law Laban. But it is Leah who bears a son named Levi. Without Leah and her child, there is no Moses. It is Leah who bears a son named Judah. Without Leah and her son, there is no David, and no Jesus.

The lives of the people in these stories are real lives. There are no plaster saints in the scripture. Maybe the reason such stories were included was to show us that the promises of God do not depend on our lives being perfect, because they are not perfect, and we are not perfect. Despite our best intentions, life is often a complicated mess. We depend, not on our perfection, but on the guidance of God.

Where do we get the idea that our lives have to be perfect? Where do we get the idea that if we don't clean up our act, God won't find us acceptable. Relax. Your life isn't perfect, and neither is mine. We depend, not on our perfection, but on the grace of God.

And that is truly a perfect life.✠