



Sermon Notes: Rod Harding,

09 June 2024

'Happy Families'

Readings: Genesis 29:31-30:24, Hebrews 13:4-6, Mark 10:2-9

'You can't always get what you want' is a well-known classic Rolling Stones song, first recorded in 1969 on the 'Let it Bleed' album. This will take us back to those far-off days, which some of us might remember ...

The main point of the song (according to the Genius website) is 'that life can suck sometimes when you're trying to get something you think you want, but that sometimes ends in you getting what you actually need.' While the passage from Genesis before us today has a similar message, it's context and style are very, very different.

Before we proceed with today's story, let's take a step back, because the real beginning of the story lies with Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, who had directly received God's promise – he would be the father of a great nation, through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed (12:2-3); his heir would be a son coming from his own body (15:4); and the covenant God was establishing would be an everlasting covenant, continuing through his descendants for generations to come (17:7). Looking back from our perspective, we see that this promise involves a seed continuing unbroken through Abraham's family line, as God had promised – '*I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you,*' (17:6), resulting in the eventual fulfilment of God's purpose through the one born as King in God's kingdom.

We pick up the account of Jacob's marriage and family at verse 31 of Genesis 29. The scene is set for what is to come in the previous sentence – Jacob's '*love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah.*' (v.30). You remember the scenario – Jacob had been tricked by Laban, his uncle and now father-in-law, into marrying both his daughters, though Jacob had only negotiated for Rachel – it is hardly an ideal setting for the commencement of a happy marriage.

There are a number of issues in this sorry story which raise questions for us – questions around the nature of the deception, the issues of a bigamous marriage, further contaminated by Jacob's sexual relationships with the servant girls who came into the marriage with his wives, the complications of periods of infertility for both wives, the constant background of competition and attempts at outplaying each other which occur not only between the women, but also are ongoing between Jacob and Laban – the whole thing is a swirling pot of problems and things that can't help but go wrong – so of course, it's no surprise when they do! But within this whole mess, God was still achieving his purpose through those he had chosen.

Before we proceed with the story, let me note one more thing. Eleven sons and one daughter are born to Jacob in this section, and for each of the boys there is a statement made by the mother which also provides, in some small part, an explanation for the name chosen for the child. It is interesting to see how the

circumstances surrounding the births give rise to their names, which are not so much direct meanings, but explained as ‘sounds like’, or ‘could be’ – I’ll leave it for the Bible study groups and/or your own closer reading of the margin notes in your Bible to help you see the connections between the names and the statements made at birth.

Back to the story. You remember Jacob’s own childhood was spent in competition with his twin brother for their father’s affection. Isaac, their dad, always preferred Esau – he was the strong one, the hunter, while Jacob preferred to stay around the tents, so we read in chapter 25, *‘Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.’* (v.28). Now it is happening again, but this time it is his two wives who are competing for his affection – though to be fair, just as Esau had the advantage with Isaac, so Rachel now has the advantage with Jacob.

Here in verse 31, we find it is God who shows pity to Leah because she is unloved, and he enables her to conceive, while Rachel remains childless. While this seems gracious and supportive, it only plays further into Leah’s awareness of her desire to be loved. Her words immediately after her first son, Reuben, is born are *‘Surely my husband will love me now,’* (v.32), as if that is really the only thing that matters. And from her perspective, it is entirely reasonable. She was only included in the marriage through deception, her husband had not been given any choice in the matter, and she knew she was very much in second place behind her younger and clearly more beautiful sister. What more could she have wanted than to have her husband love her too, at least as much as her sister was loved by him? The only problem was it didn’t seem to work!

Leah had a second son, Simeon – and this time, Leah’s words were *‘Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.’* (v.33). Surely this time, she’ll get what she wants – which is not so much another healthy son, but her husband’s love. Without further comment, the account simply goes on to the birth of her third son, Levi, when Leah again exclaims, *‘Now at last my husband will become attached to me, I have borne him three sons.’* (v.34). But the text provides us with no mention of any change in her relationship with Jacob.

Then her fourth son, Judah, was born – and this time Leah’s expression is very different. *‘This time I will praise the Lord.’* (v.35). The indication is that Leah has at last come to the realisation that as long as her desire is for something beyond her control to achieve, she will always be disappointed – for her, life will never be satisfying, she will be always looking for something which remains unachievable. Her choice, therefore, is not to wallow in her disappointment, to grieve as one with no hope, to let go and give up, as if life no longer matters to her. Rather, she has refocussed her goals, and chosen to live her life with a new purpose, one that is achievable, and will depend on her continuing choice to look to God as her hope and her joy, rather than to expect others, even her husband, to change.

Remember the Rolling Stones’ song – ‘You can’t always get what you want’? It seems that could have been Leah’s theme song at this point in her life. What she really wanted seemed impossible to achieve, and each attempt ended only in

further disappointment. But did you catch the last line of the chorus – ‘But if you try sometime, you’ll find you get what you need.’? In the world of the Rolling Stones, I’m sure they meant something quite different, but in Leah’s reality, and maybe also in our experience, in the midst of disappointments, when circumstances are not going as we hoped, we too may need to realise there could be a vast difference between what we want and what we need. Like Leah, we need to focus our attention on God and what he has purposed for us, rather than on the fleeting and largely unattainable treasures and values of this world.

But our reading today doesn’t stop at this point – the action in the story switches focus suddenly, as Rachel reasserts herself. Now jealous of her older and less-loved sister because she is the one having all the children, and in a culture where a wife without children was more a matter of shame than disappointment, she comes to Jacob, expecting him to do something about it. In the light of subsequent events, beyond the scope of today’s passage, her words are painfully and tragically prophetic – ‘*Give me children, or I’ll die!*’ (30:1). Jacob’s response is realistic – we can be sure Rachel’s childlessness is not through want of trying – ‘*Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?*’ (v.2). So just like Jacob’s grandmother, Sarah, Abraham’s childless wife, Rachel makes her own plans to achieve her goal, and requests Jacob to sleep with her servant girl, Bilhah, who had been a wedding gift from her father at the time of their marriage, that she may bear a child on Rachel’s behalf. Again, in terms of what we understand as the biblical norms of marriage, all this sounds horrendous – but remember that it was all consistent with the culture of the ancient world to which these accounts belong. Before we start appointing blame for unfavourable outcomes to what we perceive to be shocking and sinful behaviour, we need to realise that nothing in these events would have been seen as shocking in their time. Any unfavourable outcomes result from character flaws and deliberately wrong choices, not from any immoral or illegal practices within their cultural expectations.

Bilhah had two sons in succession – Dan and Naphtali – and Rachel claimed she had at last been vindicated by God, and had clearly won the struggle against her sister – though of course they were both surrogate sons, born through her servant. Soon after, Leah realised that she had ceased to fall pregnant, so if it was good enough for Rachel to offer her servant girl to Jacob, she could do the same, to maintain her lead in the competition. She did that, and her servant, Zilpah then produced two more sons, Gad and Asher, causing Leah to exclaim that she was both fortunate and happy.

But the competition was not over! Reuben, the firstborn, who must have been at least a teenager by this time, stumbled across some mandrake plants amongst the wheat fields, and brought them to his mum, Leah. The Mediterranean mandrake plant could have been regarded as a fertility drug, amongst other things, and Rachel must have seen this as a possible way towards overcoming her issues with fertility. So she made an offer to her sister – Jacob can sleep with you tonight, in return for Reuben’s mandrakes – a plan which badly backfired, as Leah went on to produce two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, as well as a daughter, Dinah.

Sadly, the pressure of the competition may have weakened her earlier resolve to focus on God's call on her life, rather than her own desires, as once again she exclaims, *'God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honour, because I have borne him six sons.'* (v.20).

Finally, at the very end of this section, the narrative returns to Rachel. It is very clear that when Rachel's turn comes at last, it is not a result of her own manipulation, nor is it anything to do with the mandrakes and their effects – we read, *'Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive.'* (v.22). When Joseph was born, Rachel herself exclaims, *'God has taken away my disgrace.'* (v.23), recognising the true origin of her delight, and the section closes with her expression of her further desire, *'May the Lord add to me another son.'* (v.24), again highlighting the tragedy of her earlier cry to Jacob, *'Give me children, or I'll die!'* (30:1). Her prayer is answered (as we'll see), but equally her own prophetic word is fulfilled.

Let me close with a brief focus on Leah, around the theme, 'you can't always get what you want.' Leah was introduced as having 'weak eyes' – she was clearly not the beautiful one, not the loved one, she would never have even been part of this marriage if not for her father and his underhanded ways. It was not at all fair for her to be in the position she was, having to compete with her beautiful sister for her husband's love. Her life was filled with constant disappointment.

Yet look again! Leah had six sons, while Rachel had only two, and then, sadly, died in childbirth with the second. Leah was able to learn some important life lessons, helping her to mature in her *'rak'* – her tenderness, her delicateness, her sensitivity – and more importantly, finding her personal significance in God rather than in family or culture (and even when she seemed to lose her focus, distracted by the continuing competition with her sister, she remains in touch with God, and is rewarded accordingly. Notice two of Leah's sons – Levi, whose tribe became the nation's priests, who would serve the Lord at the temple, seeking to maintain the true heart of Israel, focussed on God and his presence with his people; and Judah, the one through whose tribe the seed promised to Abraham would continue through the generations until Jesus was born. Leah was gifted inclusion into the seed-line of God's promise!

Life on this planet will always disappoint. All our best hopes and dreams for ourselves and those we love are destined to fall short of what we want. Whether it's marriage and family, a career opportunity, a planned holiday, an important project, a new car – in terms of this world's values, we'll end up at least somewhat disappointed. That's why this story points us to Jesus – the One born of promise, planned from eternity, from the seed continued through Leah, the fulfilment of God's purpose in his world – who offers us hope that doesn't fail, expectation that is certain, and a deep sense of joy and purpose in life lived in relationship with him – beginning now, and continuing for ever.

In the (slightly adapted) words of the Rolling Stones, 'You can't always get what you want – but if you try [*Jesus*], you'll find you get what you need!