

July 30, 2017
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Veiled”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Genesis 29:15–28

15 Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?'¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' ¹⁹Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. ²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.' ²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?'²⁶Laban said, 'This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years.' ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

“Veiled”
Genesis 29:15–28; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Last Sunday, we left Jacob at the altar, an altar in the wilderness where he heard God’s promise to bless his life and his family. Fresh from this promise, Jacob travels on to the land of his ancestors, where lo and behold, the first people he encounters just happen to know Jacob’s uncle Laban. After a joyful family reunion, Jacob is invited to stay with his relatives.

This is where we pick up the story today, when Laban asks Jacob what he wants in return for working on the family land, and we know Jacob wants something. After all this the schemer and deceiver, who is ever ready to grasp even what isn’t his. But when Laban asks Jacob what he wants in return for the work he’s doing, Jacob’s tune has changed; instead of grasping, he offers a fair deal: I will serve you seven years if you’ll let me marry your daughter Rachel.

The schemer, the deceiver, the crook, the one whose name literally means “heel” – proposes seven years of hard labor for the chance to marry the woman he loves. But Jacob has met his match in his uncle Laban. Because seven years later, on the morning after his wedding night, Jacob discovers that the new wife in his bed isn’t who he expected. Rather than Rachel, he wakes up with Laban’s older daughter, Leah. Turns out the person Jacob married isn’t the person he thought he was marrying.

In seminary, I took a class called Marriage and Family Systems. The professor assigned a book by a psychologist and marriage counselor called *Getting the Love You Want*. The premise of the book is summed up by this line: most of us marry the *right* person for all the *wrong* reasons. Now not all of us here have been or will be married, but all of us know something about love, whether romantic love or love for family or friends. And in my experience, this phrase should be, we love the right people for all the wrong reasons, because it applies to most of our relationships. In spite of all the reasons we can give for why we love who we do, the truth is there are reasons we love that are deeply unconscious, reasons we could never fully articulate. And when we make a commitment to someone – whether as a partner or a friend or a parent, chances are those unconscious reasons will eventually surface, and not always in the most pleasant or welcome ways. We find ourselves in relationships with people

who have an uncanny ability to push our buttons, to show us the very things we most need to work on in order to become who God calls us to be.

Gregory Boyle is a Catholic priest who has spent decades working in the LA projects. He's known thousands of gang members, young men and women in and out of jail, on and off of drugs, some reformed, some reforming, and many lost to violence. So someone like Lisa didn't faze Father Boyle much. She was a fixture of the neighborhood and everyone knew her, mostly because she was loud. She was always **screaming**. Screaming at the guy who kicked her out of the bar at closing time, screaming into a pay phone begging a friend or family member to let her come and stay the night.

One day, Lisa showed up in Father Boyle's office for the first time. It had been a busy day already, and Father Boyle was **late** for a baptism. But Lisa sat herself down in the chair across from his desk and said, "**I need help**. I've been to at least 50 rehabs. I'm known all over the country. You know, I went to Catholic school all my life, I even graduated from Sacred Heart High School nearby." Then she got quiet. "In fact, the first time I used heroin was right after I graduated, and *I've been trying to stop since the moment I began.*"

At this point, she leaned her head on the wall behind her and her eyes filled with tears and she cried and cried until finally she looked right at Father Boyle and said with great deliberation, "***I am a disgrace.***" And as her shame filled the room, Father Boyle's shame rose to meet it, because when he had seen her step into his office that afternoon he had not seen a human being, but an ***interruption***.¹

Imagine how Jacob felt when he realized that the woman in his marriage bed was not Rachel but Leah! Yes, the first feeling might have been **disappointment** – he had waited seven years for Rachel and then ended up married to someone else. But surely as this reality set in and Jacob realizes what Laban has done, he also discovers *what it feels like to be deceived*, to be **betrayed** by someone you thought you could trust. When Jacob wakes up with Leah instead of Rachel, he finds himself, for the first time in his life, in the position of the one *who has been betrayed* instead of the one who has done the betraying. Which means Jacob now realizes how his brother Esau and his father Isaac **felt** when *he* betrayed *them*.

¹ Father Gregory Boyle, "Faith and Compassion." Faith and Life Lecture Series, <http://www.faith-and-life.org/home>. Listen to Father Boyle's lecture in full at <http://fig.newsprouting.com/stphilipthedeaconlutheranchurch/media.php?pageID=7>.

Our relationships with others – those who know us best and sometimes those who barely know us at all – reveal the **best** and **worst** of ourselves. Before this incident, Jacob could care less about convention or cultural norms. It's easy to imagine Jacob hatching a plan to escape from the family compound in the middle of the night and run off with Rachel. Instead, Jacob agrees to stay married to Leah and serve Laban for another seven years so that he can also marry Rachel.

This is what shows us once and for all: Jacob is a changed man. Having worked for seven long years – and even if the text says they were like a few days, seven years is a long time – Jacob has been transformed by love. Love for Rachel, whom he longs to marry. But also the familial love that must have come in those years as he built relationships with his relatives – which may explain why he's willing to commit so quickly to another seven years with them. It is love that changes Jacob, for through this family, broken and dishonest as they may all be, Jacob experiences *love*.

Perhaps the most familiar biblical reflection on love is the chapter of first Corinthians that I read earlier. Because we usually hear this passage read at weddings, we can be forgiven for thinking that Paul was talking about romantic love. But Paul isn't writing this letter to friends of his who recently got hitched – he was writing to the church in Corinth, a community whose diversity of members was a true reflection of the depth and breadth of God's love.

Nevertheless, like Jacob on his wedding night, it turns out this diverse group of Jesus-followers didn't really know what they were getting when they committed to one another, and their community quickly became *mired in conflict*. In this letter, Paul is not describing romantic love, but the kind of love that originates in God, the love that gives God's people the capacity to **come together and stay together** in spite of our differences and disagreements.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that no matter how smart or educated they think they are, their vision and knowledge is significantly limited this side of heaven. *Now we see in a mirror dimly*, he writes. We see others – and ourselves, for that matter – as if from behind a veil. We struggle to understand one another's motives. We make judgments that are unkind and unfair. And so, if we are truly committed to being in relationship with one another, we must rely on the kind of love Paul describes – love that is patient, kind, selfless, genuine – love that can only come from God.

Back in January, two Presbyterian pastors in New York City reached out to President-elect Trump and offered to pray for him before the inauguration. One was the Rev. Patrick O'Connor, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, the church Trump attended as a child with his mother, the church where Trump was baptized and received a Bible that he used on Inauguration Day. The other pastor was the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, who was also baptized at First Jamaica. Black Johnston now serves a church just minutes from Trump Tower.

These two pastors reached out to Trump because they wanted him to know about the millions of Christians who belong to politically, economically, and ethnically diverse congregations. Trump took them up on their offer and, two days before the inauguration, they met with him and prayed for him. Within their congregations and beyond, the response to this was ugly and divisive. There were some who praised the meeting, others who questioned it, and others who were infuriated by it.

A few days after the inauguration, Scott Black Johnston preached a sermon in which he told stories of his twenty-five years in ministry, stories about conversations and encounters with men and women, couples and families. Many of these stories revealed the awful depths of people's sin: racism, sexism, classism, people admitting to affairs and revealing terrible rifts in their families. One man who lived next door to a church Black Johnston once served put a check for \$60,000 on his desk and said he could do what he wanted with it as long as he agreed not to house African-American refugees from Hurricane Katrina in the church. In short, Black Johnston concluded, "my experience in ministry has borne out what John Calvin declared with utter clarity back in the 16th century. We are depraved...broken...sinful. Sin runs deep in us. Sin tarnishes us all. *No one in this room escapes its grasp.*"²

If we read these Genesis stories and think they are about people and cultures who have nothing to do with us, if we look at the politicians whose positions we abhor and think they are less than human, if we judge as less than human those whose sexuality or gender identity or skin color or socioeconomic status we don't understand and can't relate to, then we have *utterly missed the point*, the point of Jacob's story, the point of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the

² Paul Seebeck, "Civil Engagement," *Presbyterians Today*, May 20, 2017. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/0617-politics/>

point of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. *There is no US and THEM.* There is only **US**, and **God loves us all**.

Our relationships, sublime or tortuous as they may be, have the ability to teach us and shape us, to remind us, as one commentator puts it, that “we are far from perfect. Families are messy and often broken. We hurt each other intentionally and unintentionally. We act in our own best interest and against the greater good of others. We forget to ask those with less power about decisions that impact their lives. To look on Jacob’s family is to look straight into human brokenness. To look on their culture is to hold up a mirror to our world that still judges individuals on their appearance and treats [some people] as less than [others].”³

When we find ourselves in relationships – chosen or thrust upon us – that surprise us and frustrate us and maybe even infuriate us, we need Paul’s wise reminder that tells us this side of heaven, we don’t see the world clearly, and we don’t fully understand others or even ourselves. In our human families and in our one human family, We are confused. We are broken. We are divided. And it is our relationships – with the Rachels we fight for and the Leahs that are given to us whether we want them or not – it is in and through all of these relationships that God is teaching and shaping us and showing us the love that is infinitely more powerful than our brokenness and sin.

Frederick Buechner once wrote, *What is both Good and New about the Good News is the wild claim that Jesus did not simply tell us that God loves us even in our wickedness and folly and wants us to love each other the same way and to love him too, but that if we will let him, God will actually bring about this unprecedented transformation of our hearts himself.* If God’s love can transform Jacob, working through his mixed-up family and messed-up culture, then God’s love is sufficient to transform our families and in our world...starting with each one of us. God transforms our hearts...through love, love that pull back the veil and enables us to see ourselves and others just a little more clearly, to recognize and to admit the depth of our sin and to know that not one of us is beyond the reach of God’s love and grace.

Amen.

³ Beth Tanner, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3353