Tale of Two Wives

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For 1500 years, a legend has persisted that Loch Ness in the Scottish Highlands (loch is the Scottish word for lake) is home to a mysterious animal called the Loch Ness Monster. The story took on added significance in 1933, when a couple reported seeing an enormous aquatic creature at Loch Ness after church one Sunday. The news created quite a sensation. A London newspaper called in a big-game hunter named Duke Wetherell to investigate. After a few days at Loch Ness, Duke identified footprints reportedly belonging to an enormous creature. Museum zoologists studied the footprints and determined they belonged to a hippopotamus. Someone had forged the imprint of a hippo footprint to create the illusion of monster tracks. Wetherell was subsequently ridiculed by both the press and public.

A grainy photograph surfaced a year later that was reportedly taken of the Loch Ness monster. For 60 years, it became the enduring image of this monster. Wetherell’s stepson, in a death bed confession, admitted that the photograph was a hoax. The monster in the picture is actually a toy submarine with a sculpted head and neck made from plastic wood. The picture is cropped in such a way that the creature looks larger than it really is. Wetherell intended it as payback for the humiliation he had suffered earlier.

Deception is all too common in American society. We require fact checkers to tell us whether politicians are telling us the truth. The internet has become a happy hunting ground for all manner of scams and viruses.

Deception features prominently in Scripture. The most infamous example of deception is Judas’s betrayal. Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss.

The Biblical patriarch Jacob is a deceiver. He comes by his name naturally. His name means “heel grabber” or “supplanter.” Jacob is born grabbing the heel of his twin brother, Esau. Jacob is forever grabbing what doesn’t belong to him. He grabs his brother’s birthright and steals his father’s blessing. Jacob’s deceit forces him to flee for his life. While he is on the run, God appears to Jacob in a dream to reassure him that he will keep his promises made to his grandfather Abraham, his father, Isaac, and, now, to Jacob.

Genesis 29:1-14

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

Jacob is forever grabbing what doesn’t belong to him.
Jacob arrives in our story at a land called Haran. His mother warns him to seek refuge in her brother’s home until the whole mess blows over. Jacob stops at a well to ask directions and learns that Uncle Laban’s home is nearby. It was customary for shepherds to congregate at local wells to water their sheep. They would wait until everyone arrived to insure that the precious commodity of water was fairly distributed. At the appointed time, they would roll the stone away from the entrance of the well to water the sheep and then roll the stone back into place.

The shepherds identify Uncle Laban’s daughter Rachel coming in their direction to water her father’s sheep. It is obvious by the size of her flock that her family is affluent. I would have expected Jacob to make appropriate introductions and then offer help in watering her sheep. Instead, in a burst of testosterone, Jacob rolls the stone away, tends to her sheep and then introduces himself as her cousin. Jacob the con man is also Jacob the Macho man.

Rachel promptly takes Jacob to introduce to her father. Laban enthusiastically welcomes Jacob into the family, “Surely you are my flesh and blood” (29:14). Laban celebrates Jacob as kin, so Jacob has every confidence that Laban will do right by him. But given the poor track record of this dysfunctional family, I wouldn’t be so sure.

Laban knows Jacob cannot work indefinitely for free, so he invites him to name his wage. Jacob, who is obviously smitten with Rachel, offers to work seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage.

Rachel also has a sister with “weak eyes” (20:17). No one is quite sure what to make of this reference. There must be something odd about her eyes, or perhaps she lacked sparkle and personality.

Jacob works seven years for Rachel. These seven years of indentured service seem like only a few days, given his love for her (29:20).

Laban throws a wedding feast for the happy couple. In virtually every wedding I do, there is a moment right after the bride has come down the aisle and the wedding service begins that the couple sneaks a peak at each other. Maybe, given this Jacob story, they want to ensure the person standing next to them is whom they are expecting to marry.

Brides in Jacob’s day were heavily veiled at their weddings. Jacob has no reason to suspect foul play. That night, Jacob consummates his marriage to Rachel, or so he thinks. The next morning, Jacob awakens to discover Leah lying next to him. Uncle Laban has pulled a fast one on Jacob and substituted Leah for Rachel.
Where is God in this whole sordid mess?

Why Laban would treat his daughters this way is beyond me. Perhaps he’s afraid Leah’s wedding prospects are slim and he must take matters into his own hands.

How could Jacob have consummated his marriage without realizing that Leah was in bed with him and not Rachel? I scoured Bible commentaries to help with this question. Various suggestions are put forward: it was pitch black in the tent or the sisters had identical voices or Jacob has had too much to drink that night.

Jacob beats a path to Laban’s door and demands an explanation. “What is it you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (29:25).

Jacob, you must be kidding! You, the deceiver, are complaining about being deceived. You have just been schooled! We call it payback. Some would call it poetic justice. It’s the golden rule, pal. You treat others the way you want to be treated. What goes around comes around!

Laban is prepared with a ready excuse. We don’t do weddings in these parts by marrying off the younger before the older is hitched. Jacob is stymied, once again, with the law of the firstborn. Obviously he hasn’t read the fine print of his contract. He reluctantly agrees to another seven years of labor in order to marry Rachel.

The guys at my health club asked me on Friday about this sermon. I told them the title and waited for their reaction. They wanted to know more about this “Tale of Two Wives.” It makes for good theater! Whatever you do, don’t tell this story to Hollywood producers. They’ll be all over it!

Why would anyone want to be married to multiple partners? Many of you find it challenging enough to be married to one person.

Let me offer a word on the subject of polygamy. Monogamy is the expressed teaching of Scripture. God institutes marriage as the union of one man and one woman in the book of Genesis. Nowhere do we find God sanctioning polygamy. So how do we explain Father Abraham and King David’s marriages to multiple wives? The simple answer is that we don’t. There is no Biblical justification for polygamy. The narrator simply tells us the story and expects us to draw our own conclusions.

Come back next Sunday, and you will see the mess polygamy creates in Jacob’s life.

Where is God in this whole sordid mess? God isn’t mentioned once in these 30 verses. God sometimes assumes center stage, as he did last Sunday in Jacob’s
It’s messy for God to redeem people.

dream from Genesis 28. Yet, at other times, God seems to work offstage and exert influence from the periphery of people’s lives. God is not mentioned in the Old Testament books of Esther and Song of Solomon, yet God is still present in these stories.

Where’s Waldo is a series of children’s books in which the reader is challenged to find Waldo hidden in the picture. His distinctive red and white striped shirt and hat, along with his glasses, makes him slightly easier to recognize, but there are several impostures in the picture.

God, like Waldo, is present in the circumstances of our lives but not always obviously so. God is likely working in this story to use Uncle Laban to help Jacob take a serious look at his own life. God didn’t prompt Laban to deceive Jacob; that would make God the author of evil. Yet God could have used the circumstances of Laban’s deceit to teach Jacob a hard lesson. It’s not hard for Jacob to recognize deceit in Laban’s life. Yet he’s not nearly so good at seeing deceit in his own life. Some of us are adept at seeing deceit in other people but not in ourselves.

This mess could have been avoided had Jacob only acted with integrity from the outset. He wouldn’t have been forced to flee his family and homeland. He wouldn’t have had to work 14 years for the right to marry Rachel.

Maybe God led Jacob to this faraway place to put him in time out. Some of you as parents utilize the practice of time out to help children cool down and ponder what they have said and done. God puts Jacob in a spiritual time out at Haran to get him to look at himself. Jacob sees for the first time how destructive deceit can be in family life and friendship. Just as Esau and Isaac were forced to live with the consequences of Jacob’s deceit, so Jacob is now forced to come to terms with Laban’s deceit.

Why on earth would God want to become involved with mixed up, messed up people like Jacob? I trust you have put two and two together by now that Jacob represents all of us. Jacob represents our grabbing, striving self.

It’s messy for God to redeem people. God’s reputation becomes tarnished by associating with deceivers like Jacob, just as God’s character is dragged through the mud today by Christians who don’t want to walk the talk.

The God of Scripture is deeply involved with people. God’s involvement with people is what led Jesus to the cross. It’s messy to redeem people.