

Pastor Adrienne Meier

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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

It's (meant to be) A Funny Story

Genesis 29:15-28

Then Jacob's uncle Laban, whom he was living with and working for, said to him, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.)

When 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?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Jesus put before the crowds another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a person found and reburied; then with joy they go and sell all that they had and buy that field."

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets

but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

This is, I think, meant to be a funny story—Jacob getting married to Laban's daughters. It began a few verses earlier when Jacob stumbled into Haran, having crossed the wilderness and, somehow, arrived at the very well where his mother was "discovered." In the Bible, wells are a "meet cute" kind of place. The sound track is something like Beyoncé's "Single Ladies." If you're looking for an eligible bride, they're here, several times a day, drawing water. This is, actually, where Jacob met Rachel, falling for her immediately, and only later did he meet Leah. Both, beautiful. But the translators apparently struggle with that piece about Leah's eyes. Though I think it's pretty clear what's being said: not that Leah's eyesight is poor, but that her eyes—well, Leah's eyes are sweet—but Rachel? She's eye candy.

This is a story that's meant to be funny. It's an origin story, but, man, it's a mess. Under the laughter is a lot of pain, and under that? Under that is a challenge: this may be where we come from, but it doesn't have to be who we are as the people of God.

The story is meant to be funny—the prank pulled on the prankster, Jacob, who tricked his father and older brother out of birthright and blessing. The parallels are there, between these two stories: beyond the younger and older children, there's the specially prepared food, the trick of sight—Isaac's blindness and the apparent darkness of the tent—in the morning, It's Leah! Jacob's incredulous cry that he has been *deceived* contains the same word of Isaac's lament when Esau comes and begs his father for blessing, Isaac says, "You brother came *deceitfully*, and he has taken away your blessing." This story is meant to be funny, but it's really just a mess.

It may be summarized as the one where the "trickster finally gets tricked," But it doesn't really seem like Jacob's the butt of the joke. The humor of the story hinges on the same kind of thing as dumb blonde jokes or mother-in-law jokes, or "that's what she said jokes:" the humor is at "her" expense. And Rachel and Leah aren't laughing. After the weddingssss, they still haven't solved anything. The women feud, nine months at a time. Leah bears children, then Rachel is jealous. Rachel gives her slave, Bilhah, to bear children; and Leah retaliates with Zilpah. When Rachel is blessed with a pregnancy and—finally!—a child, she gives him a name that essentially means, Gimme more sons! The laughter dies away at the women's desperation. Everything is just a tangled up mess.

Yet, this mirrors our own lives, doesn't it? Lives that we hope are headed toward some kind of "happily ever after," but whose days are filled with the complicated ins and outs of life in family, of life in the human community. And we often hold the pieces of the story we thought we were telling, and wonder, where is God in this?

And, sure, sure, God is in the mess. This is honest and true and sure, and it haunts me. It haunts me in part because. Well. In one of Kate Bowler's early op-eds—Kate Bowler wrote the book *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, wrestling with her experience of having late-stage cancer, of being told she is dying—and then, in remission all in her 30s, with a young child at home and a blossoming career. And, I think as advanced press for the book, she wrote this op-ed for the *New York Times* called "What to Say When You Meet the Angel of Death at a Party." Near the end, she talks about the people who, struggling with this news—struggling with her news—even if they were strangers, offered words of so-called "comfort" that really just minimized the pain and grief of her experience. They came from people all across the spiritual continuum, but, she said, "The message is the same: Stop complaining and accept the world as it is." Isn't that too often what we mean when we offer the solution to the mess as something like, "God is here, too?" Stop complaining and accept the world as it is? Yes, God is in the mess. Yes, God never leaves us or forsakes us. But does that mean we have to accept the mess?

I fear that this is what Leah and Rachel and Zilpah and Bilhah do. They become rival wives whose enmity seeps into their children like toxic pollution. Their children—twelve boys and one, lone girl—become people of violence, a few, rapists, all filled with lust for revenge. Is this the cost of accepting the world as it is? Of assuming that where we come from is the whole of who we are?

God is in the mess, but we can't use that as an excuse to minimize or dismiss the real pain and harm human beings can do to each other; the real pain and harm that fate wreaks upon any ordinary life. In truth, all too many of us have come from family systems where violence or force was used on our bodies, on children's bodies, on women's bodies. We are all in a system that as a shockingly routinely reality enacts violence on the bodies of queer folks, of women, of marginalized people, of those whose race, ethnicity, or religion has been rendered suspect because someone with a platform told us so. Many of us—too many of us, possibly all of us, have unsettling stories of pain and trauma. And a platitude ain't gonna cut it. In the midst of our lives—our real lives, our messy and tangled up lives, our complicated lives—we need the true acts of faith that see things as they are and refuse to let them remain that way.

This story may be meant to be funny, and it is a mess, but it is also a story about the origins of a people. It is a story that seeks to answer questions about why this people or that people are the way they are. Why is it that our lives are complicated? Why is it that sometimes bad things happen to us, and they happen at the hands of other people?

And, if this is a story of the people of God, it is a confession: this is where we come from—laughter and its tears, joy and its sorrow, peace and, sometimes, conflict. This is where we come from, but this story is also a challenge: who we are in God—who we are in Christ—is so much more than where we come from.

Who we are in God is a people being refined, our inner selves sorted and cleansed like a full catch of fish. Who we are in God is a people bought with a price, a people treasured and valued like fine pearls, even if we were nothing but a speck of dust to a clam. Who we are in God is a people being stirred up toward justice, toward righteousness, like a baker mixing up hundreds of loaves to sell, the yeast like the joy and hope that bubbles up in us. Who we are in God is a people being grown like a mustard seed, strong and tall. Who we are in God is a people sheltered like the birds of the air, nestled in the branches of a great tree.

Who we are in God is a people whose lives are bent toward justice, toward mercy, toward peace, toward God's extravagant grace. This is a funny story, an origin story, a messy story, but it is *our* story—our story and *God's* story, a challenge to be more than what we've been so that we can be fully who we are in Christ. Amen.