

Old and New

Genesis 29:15-28
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-50

“Colpo di fulmine”. Italian for lightning bolt. But also an Italian idiom for love at first sight. The idea is that when love strikes it often strikes instantaneously and powerfully. We seem to have an example of that in Genesis 29. Jacob the trickster gets tricked. At the bidding of his father Abraham, Jacob has gone back to their ancestral homeland Haran to seek a wife. God has given their family a new land, Israel, but to populate it they apparently need offspring with no connection to the genetic pool of that land. So Jacob, enriched and entitled by his father's success, goes back to find a mate. He has status. He has a pedigree. Whom might he attract for a mate? It turns out he has a well-to-do uncle, Laban, who can help him with this problem. Laban's daughters would be Jacob's cousins. Unlike today, in that time and place this would have been a major plus.

I have seventeen female cousins. When I was of marrying age the thought of marrying any of them never occurred to me. Nor would they think of me as a potential mate. But in early biblical history, a first cousin was not only a permissible, but a desirable, mate. It all came down to preserving the family property. So Jacob dutifully travels across the desert to seek a wife from the family-approved pool of applicants. If he can accept one of Laban's daughters all will go well within the extended family.

Then the lightning bolt strikes. Jacob falls for Rachel. Apparently her older sister Leah is not unattractive; the text tells us at least that her eyes were beautiful. This may be a circumnavigation, a way of saying the rest of her was nothing much to look at. So let us stop here and comment. This entire story rests upon stereotypes of about men, that we are hyper-motivated by visual cues. By implication, women are not. Both assertions are only partially true. We are *all* motivated by visual cues. This is an established fact of zoology, of the state of all animals including us. To deny this is to deny biology. Mongeese, salamanders and Japanese Beetles all make choices based on appearance. Female peacocks do so based not only on the plumage of their male counterparts but also on their ability to dance. Thank God human women mostly give men a break on the dance requirement!

So Jacob enters into a verbal contract with Leah and Rachel's father, Laban. He will labor seven years on his future father-in-law's property in order to win the right to marry his younger daughter, the beautiful Rachel. Let us stop again to recognize a father's obligation then and there. He must secure a mate, first, for his eldest daughter. Her job then becomes producing a male heir. We may not care for this order, but it was in fact what the culture expected. I have two children, a daughter and a son. I have three grandchildren, a grandson and two granddaughters. I thank God for all five of them and I could not possibly care less what sex each of them is. They are who they are, and what a blessing! Jacob faced a different set of expectations. His father Abraham, his mother Sarah, his wife Rebecca: they all expected him to keep the male line alive.

The people we speak of lived more than 3,500 years ago. They followed an archaic but robust set of rules and expectations. Those expectations survive in certain cultures to this day. We know a Causasian young man who fell in love with an exemplary young woman of Indian-American descent. Her grandparents had immigrated to America from Gujarat, the Indian state from which Ghandi came. They had almost everything in common, values, aspirations, hopes for the same number of children, even where to vacation. They did not, however have one thing in common her family considered necessary: his ethnic background, his skin color did not meet their expectations. So they communicated to them both, male and female, that they could not accept their match. They broke off their relationship.

Jacob and Leah, and Rachel, could check every box. In fact, to Jacob it clearly seemed that his discovery of this family with two daughters was God-given. Why else would he labor fourteen years for the two of them? Would you defer your dreams fourteen years? Would I? Scholars of ancient literature consider this an entirely reliable narrative. It has no parallels in Greek, Egyptian or Chinese sagas. It has no coherence, no internal integrity. Why write about Jacob's folly if it did not happen exactly as recorded? He discovered the woman he wanted—and before her, the woman he could accept—and he did what it took to wed them. It was the old way, the tradition, and even such an unconventional man as Jacob followed it.

So we have a biblical story built on observing the goodness of the old. And now we have a biblical story built on Jesus calling on his followers to observe the goodness

of the new. In our current section of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells a series of agricultural parables. Last Sunday Steve Mead quite properly noted this, and he built his sermon on a parable that precedes ours today: the parable of seeds sown by “the enemy”. They grew amid seeds sown by God, but God would allow them all to mature. Once they became ready for reaping, the servants of God would separate the good crop from the bad. The bad would get burned in the furnaces of hell. The good would get welcomed into God's storehouse. Thus we learn that if we turn to Satan for our growth we get burned. But if we turn to God, we prosper.

Today we read the familiar parables of the mustard seed and of the treasure hidden in the field. Think of that latter one. Who would be so audacious as to bury treasure in an open field? It turns out that creative, foresighted people do. One great family fortune today comes from Polish Jews who lived in the Warsaw ghetto in the 1930's and '40s. The matriarch of the family saw much more clearly than most what the German Nazis would do. She insisted in 1938 that her family bury their jewelry and not a few gold bars in a common field a few kilometers out of the city. It was at a heavily-traveled crossroads, so she made her son do the hiding in the wee hours of a morning. The planting and reaping of the field hid the disturbed ground. Every member of her generation—and the next youngest—died in the camps of World War II. But two grandchildren survived. In 1946 they followed family lore to a specific spot in that field. They dug up enough wealth to become important investors in Polish steel mills during the Soviet era—and supporters of the Solidarity movement that helped end the Soviet era.

We need to honor both the old and the new. We need to have the spiritual understanding to know which of the old ways merit preserving. And we need to have the spiritual insight to identify which of the new ways merit adopting. When we, like Jacob, journey outside of our comfort zones, where we know what works and what does not, where we know what has made us happy and what has not, we need to have a deep connection to godly traditions. What worship music connects us to the Spirit of God? What old habits of the church feed us as we strive to walk with Jesus? What new seeds might connect not only us, but also folks new to the fellowship of God? As we sow new seeds, we must take account of the seeds we throw. I do not accuse us of working for Satan. I do, however, ask us to consider what we're throwing out there. Somehow, we must find a way to sow tried and true seed in a way that finds roots in a new culture, a new agriculture.

We have hit this theme fairly hard over the past weeks. But well I have learned that just talking about something does not equal making change happen. I have served four churches as an ordained minister of the Word and sacrament. At the first I was a youth pastor whose portfolio did not extend into changing the church's habits and culture. At each of the others, including this one, I have faced the question of whether to support the status quo, or to advocate for change to position the congregation for growth into the foreseeable future. And here we are again. Because the future is inescapable. In his book Leadership for Vital Congregations, author Anthony Richardson writes, "People do not fear change. They fear loss. The problem is, change so often feels like loss. When asked to take a new road, we see what we

must sacrifice. And who can blame us?" I, for one, cannot. I am the product of a traditional family with traditional religious values. By instinct I share these values. But how will we really preserve them?

We will sow good seed by identifying what truly matters, what our core religious values actually are, and adopting strategies to preserve them into the uncertain future of American Christianity. Jacob went home, at the cost of a considerable amount of time and effort, to find a wife. Doing so satisfied a core value of his people. Jesus taught that we must take care to sow good seed. Doing so satisfied a core value of his message. As Jesus followers we must strike a balance between the old and the new. The only way to do so is to test all we think, say and do against the principles of the Gospel. The great 20th century preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick said that his job was, "to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable." I see a great deal of truth in this. Today, I am trying to afflict the comfortable. This is a comfortable church, and thank God for that. But what might we change, what might we lose, in order to obey God's call upon us? *That* is a question that matters a great deal indeed. In fact, it might be the only question that really matters for us today. Treasure both the old and the new. Maintain the meaningful and powerful traditions of the church. But also, sow good seed into new fields. There are many, many people out there who hunger for the Good News of the Gospel.

This congregation stewards God's truth and beauty. Let us work together to find ways to share that good news with more and more people.