

Date: July 24, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 17

**SERMON: The Subtext of Grace**

Text(s): Genesis 29:15-28

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We live, so we're told, in the "postmodern" age, whatever that means. One feature of this postmodern world is a fascination with subtexts. Even the term, I think, is a post-modern invention. Now, we all know what a text is. It's something written or printed in a book or a magazine or a newspaper, or even a script for a movie or play. Texts can also be oral—what one person says to another can be, in the strict sense, a text. This is understandable enough. But what is a subtext? And why should we be concerned with them?

When President Bush goes off to meet with other heads of governments, as he did recently when the leaders of the G-8 countries held their economic summit in Scotland, there is normally some official communique that is released to the press to describe the results of the talks. Sometimes the text of the statement will say that the talks were "cordial and productive." The subtext of that statement is that no agreement was reached, but at least no one lost their temper and pounded the table with their shoe. Or, the text of the statement may say that the talks were "frank and useful," in which case the subtext is that no agreement was reached, and the negotiators did lose their cool and call each other various bad names and accuse one another's governments of various sins.

Or to cite an even more familiar example which any husband learns very quickly: When your spouse asks, "Honey, does this dress make me look fat?" that's the text. But as any postmodern husband knows, the subtext is "Do you love me even though I'm twenty pounds heavier than when we got married?"

The story of the relationship between Jacob and his uncle Laban which was our Old Testament lesson this morning, is a text in which

there are also several important subtexts. What's going on below the surface is far more interesting and important than the simple story of two accomplished con-artists trying to get the best of one another.

Jacob, or "Heel-grabber," which is what his name means, is the second-born twin son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. He has already established his own reputation as an ambitious schemer. He has deceptively manipulated his twin brother Esau into first giving up his birthright, and then deceived his elderly, blind father into giving him the patriarchal blessing instead of Esau, whose right it was by tribal law to have it.

After Jacob's scheme to defraud Esau of the patriarchal blessing, however, he has had to flee for his life from his brother's wrath. He's made his way back to his mother's clan and home country, and he's found refuge with his uncle Laban, the now elderly head of the clan. On the way there, he's had a remarkable dream, and has learned from this dream that the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac knows who he is, and has promised to be with him to bless him wherever he goes.

As we saw last week, this revelation was not entirely comforting to Jacob, both because of his fear in finding himself in the presence of a power greater than his own, and also because Jacob has discovered that he's being watched, as it were. God's eye is on him, and so all his manipulative schemes, all his ambitious moves are known. And given his behavior, that can't have been terribly comforting to him.

In the story today, Jacob meets his match in his maternal uncle Laban. Laban is every bit as shrewd, every bit as ambitious and manipulative as Jacob. Watching these two go head to head in competition for wealth and dominance is part of the fun of this story.

Just prior to the passage we read today, Jacob has been getting a drink from a well at an oasis, and there has an encounter with a beautiful young woman who is watering her goats. He

instantly falls head over heels in love with her, and gallantly waters her flock for her. In the process, he learns that she is his cousin Rachel, the younger daughter of his uncle Laban, whose protection he's seeking.

Laban is the chief of a clan of Bedouin shepherds and herders. After Jacob has been there a month, and working alongside Laban's shepherds every day, Laban says to him, "*Look, just because you're my kinsman doesn't mean that you have to work for me for nothing. Tell me what you think is a fair wage.*" I suspect, from what comes next, that Laban already knew exactly what it was that Jacob wanted. He had to have noticed Jacob's eyes following his younger daughter Rachel as she moved about the camp. He's not approaching Jacob with this magnanimous offer because he's such a good guy who just wants to be fair. If that were the case, there'd be no story. No, he's making this offer because there's something he wants from Jacob.

For once, Jacob's calculating ambition is overtaken by his passion for Rachel, so he falls neatly into the trap Laban has set for him. The storyteller sets the stage by describing Laban's two daughters, the elder one Leah and the younger one Rachel. Our translation says, "*Leah's eyes were lovely but Rachel was graceful and beautiful.*" The meaning of the Hebrew word in the description of Leah's eyes is uncertain, so the word "lovely" is just a translator's best guess. Most likely, the storyteller's intent is to say that even though Leah had lovely eyes, Rachel's beauty was of another order of magnitude. She's a knockout. The point is that it was not Leah to whom Jacob was attracted. So he answers Laban's question about what he would consider a fair wage by asking for Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban tells Jacob that he must work seven years to earn Rachel's hand; that will be, in effect, the customary bride price.

We no longer have the custom of a bride price in the West anymore, where women are not considered the property of their fathers or

husbands, but in some cultures of the world, it is still a custom. Carol and I had classmates in college who fell in love and wanted to get married. The woman's parents were missionaries in what was then Zaire (now Congo), and so when they got engaged, her intended wanted to do the customary thing of asking for her parents' blessing. Since telephones were scarce in Zaire in those days, they found a ham radio operator who connected them to her parents, and he dutifully told them that he loved their daughter and wanted their approval and blessing to marry. Her dad replied, "Well, over here in Zaire, we have this custom of the bride price. So I figure that if you really want to marry my daughter, she's worth about two turkeys and a Kentucky country ham."

Rachel was worth considerably more it seems— seven years of indentured work. But Jacob agrees to Laban's proposal without hesitation. The writer says, "*So Jacob served Laban seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.*" Ah, isn't that romantic? Don't you just love a love story? But, this story, as we'll see, is only partially about love; it's more about ambition and power.

Jacob's seven-year itch results, at long last, in a wedding. On his wedding night, after the feasting and drinking and dancing, he takes his long-awaited bride into the tent, and enjoys her embraces all night long. In the morning, when it gets light, he is shocked, SHOCKED! to discover that he has been making love, not to Rachel, the woman of his dreams, but to Leah, the elder sister!

Don't ask how he could not have known? That's pressing a good story too far. If you must have a reason for how Jacob could have been so taken in, you can chalk it up to how drunk he was or the darkness of the tent, or the custom of women being veiled if you need an explanation. The narrator says simply, "*When morning came, it was Leah!*" Whatever the reason, he's now

married to Leah. His uncle Laban has pulled a fast one on him.

The irony is delicious, isn't it? The schemer gets out-schemed. The biter gets bitten. Laban's rather lame explanation that because of their tribal custom of elder daughters marrying before younger daughters, he had to do what he did, doesn't dampen the glee we feel at Jacob getting a taste of his own medicine. The reader, at this point, might be tempted to respond, "Yes! There is a God! There is justice in the universe after all!"

Even Leah and her sister Rachel had to have at least gone along with their father's scheme, if not actually conspired in it with him to make sure that the less-favored sister would not go through life without a husband. Laban makes sure that even though he exacts—some might say extorts—another seven years of labor from Jacob, he doesn't make the burden unbearable, for he asks that Jacob only fulfill his husbandly duties to Leah for the honeymoon week in order to try to get her pregnant. Then, if he agrees to another seven years, he can have Rachel as Number Two wife while he is serving out those years. So what can Jacob do but agree? Now he's got two wives, he's still bound to his uncle rather than being a free man, but at least he has Rachel.

This is by no means the end of the competition between these two strong, ambitious, and clever men. If you continue reading beyond where our story leaves off this morning (and I encourage you to do that so you'll be ready for the climax of this story next week.), you'll read about how Jacob gets his own back on Laban.

But at this point, we begin to encounter the subtexts in this text. You may have noticed that up to this point in our reading today, God has not even been mentioned. God's absence from the text is not accidental, I suspect. God's absence is part of the story itself. It's one of the subtexts. Everything that has happened to this

point, has been the result of two men, bound by ties of kinship and a struggle for dominance, scheming to get what they want. They have completely left God out of the picture; the deceits and manipulations they practice on one another, the rivalry for power that is present in their relationships with one another, the trust that is destroyed between them when Jacob wakes up and finds out he's been had, the careless way in which both Leah and Rachel are treated, the damage done to their own relationship as sisters when Jacob openly prefers Rachel to Leah— all these destructive things happen because they have left God out of their calculations.

Which of us hasn't gotten ourselves into various messes by leaving God out of the picture? It's not a question of whether or not we believe in God. It's a question of whether or not we allow that belief to make any difference in the decisions we make and the goals we set and the way we go about achieving them or the way we treat other people.

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, of the Russian Orthodox church, in his excellent little book, *Beginning to Pray*, comments on the common experience we have of feeling that God is absent and not involved in our world or in our lives, and asks whether it is really God who is absent or whether it is we who make ourselves absent to God by leaving God out of all our calculations, our plans, our hopes, our daily lives. The answer, I think, as we see it in this story, is that if God is absent to us, it is because we have not made ourselves present to God.

But if the consequences of leaving God out of the picture is one subtext in this story, there is another that is closely related. And that subtext is that above and behind and around and through all that happens in this story God is much more involved than anyone in the story realizes. And God's agenda is rather different than Jacob's or Laban's, or even Leah's and Rachel's.

*"When the Lord saw that Leah was*

*unloved, he opened her womb and she conceived.*” God has been there all along, watching, over-seeing. And what God has seen is a woman treated as nothing more than a bargaining chip in their ambitious game. The story ends with Leah, the unlovely and unloved, giving birth to a total of six sons and a daughter. Her fourth son is named Judah. And Judah became the patriarchal ancestor of King David, the archetypal king of Israel, from whose line the messiah was expected to come. From unloved Leah will come the hope of Israel. That is the subtext of grace. And we Christians who claim that Jesus was that messiah or Anointed One, trace his ancestry to David, as both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke affirm. We bear witness to our own inheritance in that subtext of grace when we sing at Christmas, *“Hail to the Lord’s anointed, great David’s greater Son.”*

That subtext gives me hope because it tells me that even when we think that God is absent, that God doesn’t see or care about those who have been wronged, in fact, God is at work in hidden, and sometimes, surprising and ironic ways. God sees who is unloved, and comes to their aid. God is there behind the scenes working to redeem and to bring to a blessed end all of the unblest troubles you or I bring on ourselves and others or which others bring on us..

God’s grace does not spare us from suffering the wrongs we inflict on ourselves or others, or the wrongs we have done to us. All the characters in this story had to live with the consequences of the things they did or had done to them, just as we do. But God’s grace is always at work to redeem the situation— to bring good out it; as St. Paul tells us in that statement that was our greeting this morning. *“In everything (not **from** everything, but **in** everything), God is at work to bring good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose.”* That redemption may come at some cost to us in wasted opportunities, lingering regrets, and tragic if-only’s and might-have-beens. But God is at

work to redeem, to transform, to wrest good from human evil. God will not let go of us, and that’s the gospel in this story. God does see. God does care. God does act to redeem us from our follies and our troubles. God is gracious. And in that subtext, which is like a scarlet thread woven into the very fabric of human history and of our lives, we can take hope.