

From the book of Genesis: “Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel.”

And from Romans: “Neither death, nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This morning in our Gospel, we continue in the parables section of Matthew’s gospel, where Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that, though small, grows into one of the greatest of trees. In our reading from Romans, Paul persuades us to believe that God causes all things to work together for good, that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Why then, you may ask, do I want to talk about the story of Jacob marrying two sisters? It is awkward, even by Old Testament standards, how the morning after, Jacob realized he married the wrong sister.

Usually, when we think of Jacob and his strange brand of bad-boy faith, we think of the lessons he learned the hard way, the ways that he fooled others in order to get what he wanted. We marvel that God accepted this bad-

boy faith, that despite his flaws he was chosen to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. We wonder how God finally transformed him eventually. And we marvel how Jacob was once tricked into marrying two sisters.

You will remember that Jacob had played one trick too many and had to leave home so his brother wouldn’t kill him. It was there, in the middle of that trial, hiding from his brother and trying to get life straightened out, that he met Rachel—graceful and beautiful Rachel. I suspect it almost made sense to him, that all this trouble had been worth it, because it meant having met Rachel.

Her father Laban, though, was tricky like Jacob... and Jacob had met his match, and Laban had the upper hand. And everyone knew that Jacob was crazy about Rachel. Men often struggle to hide our feelings very well in the face of grace and beauty! Jacob would do anything, and everyone knew it, including Laban. So he suggested an arrangement, and Jacob never argued even once.

We find out only later in the story that there was one, shall we say “crucial,” detail in this verbal contract they had made. Laban forgot to mention that their culture demanded that the oldest daughter always marry first. Whether that is true or not, we don’t really know. But as it turned out in the narrative, Jacob had spent seven long years working for the wrong girl. At the wedding, we can only imagine that Leah was covered in a very thick veil, and that perhaps Laban had offered Jacob a couple of glasses of wine before the wedding to help “calm his nerves!” The next morning, all was revealed when Jacob turned to look at the beautiful eyes of Leah, the sister he didn't’ think he had married.

The writers of Genesis are careful not to say anything negative about Leah. They only write that, “Leah’s eyes were lovely.” I wish that meant that her beautiful eyes could have been enough to make this all okay, but most scholars surmise that this is the ancient Hebrew parallel of saying that she had a nice personality. Yes, Genesis makes sure we know about Rachel—graceful, beautiful Rachel... and about Leah, whose dad had to trick a man

into marrying her. On her first morning as a married woman, her lovely eyes must have gazed into the face of a baffled husband who thought he married her sister.

Jacob and Laban worked it out, which must have made almost everyone happy. Jacob would stay another seven years for Rachel. As soon as Leah’s wedding was over, probably a week later, Jacob went on to marry her little sister. Again, Genesis makes no attempt to pretend that it happened differently than it did. “Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah.” “So if there’s a patron saint for those who’ve drawn the short end of the stick, it’s Leah.”

It happened in my family, though. Not exactly the way that it happened for Jacob so many years ago, but my grandfather married two sisters. It was 1930 and my grandfather, Wm. Paul Weldon married a young woman from Warm Springs, GA, named Grace. She was literally Grace-ful and beautiful, as Rachel had been. But five years later, in 1935, Grace died of appendicitis, leaving behind two small children and a devastated husband.

My grandmother was Grace's older sister whom love had passed by, so they asked her to go join the family to take care of the two children. So she lived there and cared for the children, and there seems to have been a loving awkwardness to the arrangement. In our family, there was always debate as to whether my grandfather fell in love with the older sister, my grandmother, or if she simply believed it wrong to live with a man—even though she was there to take care of her sister's children—to live with a man she hadn't married. All we know for sure is that my grandfather married her, too.

But one thing we never wondered about was how my grandmother loved those two children as her own. She went on to have three that were hers, but as I grew up, I only knew that there were five children. That is how everyone knew the family and the arrangement and the love that developed. And these years later, Ella ended up being named after my older Aunt Elizabeth, who is and isn't really 100% my aunt, a fact that seems about as irrelevant as Leah having lovely eyes. Despite the pain that they experienced in life—he losing a young wife

with two children, and she, losing her sister and marrying the man who had once chosen her younger sister—neither of them ever seemed to us to be limited by the disappointments in life. Perhaps they took a page out of Genesis and realized that God does not always give us exactly what we want, but that in whatever life gives us—God gives us a measure of grace and strength to make it through.

In this old story from Genesis, we see how Leah really was the patron saint of those who need grace in a time that seems hopeless. We see how it seemed that the cards were stacked against her. But we also see how, in the end, her beautiful eyes and faithfulness redeemed the situation. No, I don't really think it is a good idea to marry two sisters, even if my grandfather made it work! But without my family's crazy tree, I wouldn't be here... and more importantly to most of the world, neither would Ella and James! So I am thankful that they found grace in the midst of death, that they weathered the storm and discovered the slim chance of love's recovery.

And I believe that this is exactly what happened in our ancient narrative. Leah was the key to the story.

Without Leah and her beautiful eyes, God's promise to Jacob may not have come true. Six of his sons came from her, including Levi, the father of all priests; including Judah, the father of the greatest tribe of Israel.

Jacob loved Rachel more, yet Rachel died early in this story. And in sadness, Jacob buried Rachel outside of Bethlehem in an unadorned grave. Yet Scripture tells us that Jacob came to love Leah (and her beautiful eyes) during the many years they shared. Today you can visit that holy shrine, sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, where Leah is buried next to Jacob—and Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah. We know why Jews and Muslims visit the sight, because their common ancestor Abraham is buried there. But it occurs to me that we as Christians may visit there for other reasons as well. As you may have figured out by now, one of Leah's descendants was Jesus, the firstborn of all whom life has treated poorly, whom God went on to vindicate.

I think that's what Paul meant when he wrote that, in the end, all things do work together for good for those who love God... and neither death, nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And I wonder if Jesus ever thought about this, how he read this crazy story about his own family and thought back on them. Maybe he thought back to the story of Grandpa Jacob, who ultimately found the transformation God intended him to find. Maybe he thought back to Grandma Leah, who in patience and faithfulness not only found happiness in life, she became a part of God's sacred story. Maybe that is how he learned that God does not always give us exactly what we want, but that in whatever life gives us, God gives us grace and strength to make it through. So that is why he taught that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. It takes time. And it takes patience. But, God willing, and may it be for us, it always yields a bumper crop.