

God Bless This Mess
Genesis 29:15-28
August 20, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Before this Jacob lied to his father and stole everything from his brother, and then had to flee for his life. He travels more than 500 miles and shows up on his uncle Laban's doorstep with nothing more than the clothes on his back. But in his uncle Laban, the scheming, tricky Jacob has met his match.

...

Genesis 29:15-28

¹⁵ Laban said to Jacob, "You shouldn't have to work for free just because you are my relative. Tell me what you would like to be paid."

¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters: the older was named Leah and the younger Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah had delicate eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and was good-looking. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel and said, "I will work for you for seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter."

¹⁹ Laban said, "I'd rather give her to you than to another man. Stay with me."

²⁰ Jacob worked for Rachel for seven years, but it seemed like a few days because he loved her. ²¹ Jacob said to Laban, "The time has come. Give me my wife so that I may sleep with her." ²² So Laban invited all the people of that place and prepared a banquet. ²³ However, in the evening, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he slept with her. ²⁵ In the morning, there she was—Leah! Jacob said to Laban, "What have you done to me? Didn't I work for you to have Rachel? Why did you betray me?"

²⁶ Laban said, "Where we live, we don't give the younger woman before the oldest. ²⁷ Complete the celebratory week with Leah. Then I will give you Rachel too for your work, if you work for me seven more years." ²⁸ So that is what Jacob did. He completed the celebratory week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife.

...

Well, now. This is a mess.

Laban puts Jacob to work for seven years to earn a bride but pulls a bait and switch at the last moment, and forces Jacob to work seven more years for the woman he originally wanted. Then after this passage, there's a lot of wrangling about who has kids. Right after our chapter ends today, we hear about how God gave Leah lots of children as a consolation prize for being the less-loved wife. Rachel, like Sarah and Rebekah, is barren for years, but eventually has two sons. Then Leah and Rachel start competing to have the most kids and force their servants, Zilpah and Bilhah, to also bear children for Jacob. Between the four of them, they produce 12 boys who go on to become the fathers of the tribes of Israel.

This is our religion's origin story. Our ancestors in the faith come from a liar and a cheat who got tricked by his uncle, married two of his cousins, and had a dozen children with four different women. Again, these are not the sorts of biblical family values that are usually talked about.

Can you imagine sharing a story like that over cookies and lemonade after worship? I have no doubt that folks here would be very supportive and accepting, but let's be honest—this is not the kind of stuff we usually talk about at church: lying, manipulating, consummating marriages, loving someone who's not your spouse. As my mother would say, this is not for polite society.

And yet our bible is just chock full of this kind of stuff. It's hard to think of any characters who are models of righteousness, purity, or even just "normal"—whatever that means. Moses had a fear of public speaking and a history of violent crime. David had a weak spot for other people's wives. Elijah couldn't take a joke. Jeremiah was too young. Ezekiel had hallucinations. The disciples were often bumbling idiots. Paul, without whom we wouldn't be here, had a first career of killing Christians.

And Jesus, well, Jesus was unhoused. Rumor had it that he was a glutton and a drunk. He hung out with all the wrong sort and often made a scene. He did not fit into polite society.

Why would the bible tell all these stories? These are not the sort of people I am inclined to hold up as role models. Why would God work with people like this?

Maybe because this is the only kind of people there are. Who doesn't have some kind of weirdness to them? Who is not a mix of incredible beauty and persistent flaws? Maybe your flaws are more mundane than some of our biblical heroes—a tendency to micromanage, or a habit of being thoughtless, or a judgmental streak—we've all got our stuff.

And we all have stories they don't tell in polite company, chapters of our lives we leave out or branches on the family tree we'd rather not claim.

When God wiped out the world in the flood, God was looking for perfect people and could only find Noah. After the devastation of that decision, God says never again—not because everybody was now perfect, but precisely because we're never going to be. God decided to give up looking for perfect people, and instead work with what's here. And none of these characters' failures or flaws derails God. The pull of love is too strong to be disrupted by people being people.

So, if this is what God's like—working with regular people, and this is what the Bible's like—full of stories of regular people in all their ridiculousness, then why do we think we have to be put together and well-behaved in order to be "good Christians?"

I get why many people choose to dress up for church. I dress up. It's a way of marking this time as special. But as a child, I heard it framed as "dressing up for God." Let's be clear: we do not need to dress up for God. We're just fine the way we are. Our efforts to dress ourselves up only separate us from God and each other.

I absolutely adore when I see children running around here barefoot and in clothes with paint on them from exuberant art creation, or when I notice someone still has dirt under their fingernails from getting their hands in the dirt that morning. If you hate how dress clothes feel, or just don't have any, consider this a permission slip, a blessing, to wear whatever makes your heart sing, or whatever you wear for your daily acts of care, or whatever is comfortable enough to help you

bring a clear mind and open heart to genuinely worship. Remember, Jesus couldn't stand folks who made a show.

Shame and embarrassment about our flaws twists and distorts our lives more than the flaws themselves. If we accept that sin is anything that separates us from God, neighbor, or self, then shame and pretense definitely fit the category. And it seems that far too often rather than relieving people of the burden of shame, Christianity contributes to it. Or maybe we should say Christianity as it is often practiced by wealthy, white folks in the US.

We tell white-washed stories of Jesus and our ancestors and of our own lives, leaving out the messier bits. We post the beautiful, happy pictures online and maybe one tantrum pic as a joke. Even our imperfection is perfectly curated. We answer, "How are you?" with superficial responses, or cliches, or jokes, or evasions, or outright lies. I certainly have at times. I'm not suggesting we have to tell the private details of every struggle to every person we meet, but how would it feel to let our guard down a bit? What grace might slip in while it's down?

Fred Rogers once said, "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable." This is the truth of confession. And this is the testimony of scripture.

Let's make this a space where we can answer honestly: "The truth is, I'm struggling." "The truth is I've messed up." "The truth is I need some help." Let's be a community rooted in scripture where we can bring our whole selves, our beautiful faithful, flawed, messy selves.

We need that, and the world needs it, and God is more than able to work in it and through it all. In fact, if scripture is our guide, God prefers the mess, the sweat-stained shirt, the intractable character flaws, the failures. God is quite content to be with and work with people like Jacob.

We wouldn't be here in this gorgeous space with light streaming in and beautiful music echoing above our heads if it weren't for our ancestors who came to know the God of Relentless Love in and through both their transcendent and mundane moments, their moments of pride and their deep failures. We wouldn't be here if the one we follow, the one who brought Divine Love in the flesh, hadn't been born in a manger—and you never have a manger without some manure nearby. For the manger and the manure, thanks be to God.

...

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023