

“Jacob and His Two Wives”

Theme: Wrestling with God

Scripture: *Genesis 29:16-20*

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments for Monday, September 30 - Read Genesis 29:1-15— God begins to carry out the promise to watch over Jacob. Jacob finds his uncle Laban and meets Laban's daughter Rachel (an important “plot point”). Laban welcomes Jacob to his home as a kinsman. This story is a lot like the one in Genesis 24, when Abraham's servant found Isaac's wife (and Jacob's mother) Rebekah.

- Last week we read God's promise to Jacob: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.” (Genesis 28:15) How does today's reading show God fulfilling that vow? What makes it important for Jacob (and us) to know that his journey works out well not just due to his talent and skill, but also to God's blessing?
- So far, we've mainly seen the dark side of Jacob. Like all of us, he had another side. He showed gallantry, kindness and a certain amount of courage in helping Rachel and making contact with his uncle's family. Who do you know whose “dark side” dominates your view of them? Look for and name the “bright spots” in that person.

Tuesday, October 1 – Read Genesis 29:16-30 - Jacob got married—twice! Jacob worked seven years, married Rachel (he thought), and was shocked to find her older sister Leah with him the next morning. Leah wasn't necessarily ugly. The word rendered “weak” can also mean “delicate,” a compliment. But Jacob loved Rachel, not Leah. A week later, Laban gave him Rachel—for seven more years of work!

- In that time, the norm was, as Laban said, to marry an older daughter first. In not being candid about this from the first, Laban duped Jacob. Have you ever dealt like Laban? Have you ever felt like Jacob, hurt and angry? How can God's wisdom help you see below the surface at such times, and lead toward healing and peace?
- Laban gave his daughters lavish dowries, but also an example of deceit in his personal dealings. From verse 30 we can see that he set them up for a home filled with sorrow and conflict. What are you working hard to pass on to your children? Will your main legacy be a quantity of “stuff,” or a life filled with integrity and love?

Wednesday, October 2– Read Genesis 29:31 – 30:24— Leah and Rachel battled bitterly with each other. Leah had children, but longed for Jacob's love. Rachel had his love, but ached for children. Both wives gave Jacob their maidservants as pawns in their struggle for family status. Amid all the emotional pain, something vital was happening: the 12 forefathers of the tribes of Israel were being born.

- This is Israel's own story of how God kept the covenant promise to make Abraham's family a great nation. No glitzy fake heroics here! If God worked through the envy and pain of Jacob's family, what may God do as you face hard situations? When has God bent an "evil" in your life to create a "good" for you and God's kingdom?
- Jacob, his wives and the writer of Genesis all held notions about God and childbearing that we don't share. God loved and worked with them despite their faulty ideas. Can you see where God worked in your life when you held ideas that you no longer hold? What makes loving God perhaps even more vital than knowing all about God?

Thursday, October 3— Read Genesis 30:25 – 31:21— Once Rachel had a son, Jacob asked to go home. "Stay," said Laban. They made a deal based on sheep coloring that seemed stacked in Laban's favor. But Jacob did very well. Jacob's methods aren't credible today—even Jacob and Genesis gave God credit for his success. Though God again promised safety, Jacob got scared and ran—again.

- One minute Jacob praised God for giving him success, the next he plotted how best to advance himself. Jacob was—well, a lot like us. When has God worked for you and others through something you planned and initiated? When has God done something startling, which left you feeling "Wow—I'm just along for the ride"?
- Laban said he'd learned about God's blessing "by divination" (later banned in Lev. 19 and Deut. 18). Then Rachel stole her father's "household gods"! What does it tell you about Israel's God that God did not just give up on these idol-worshipping, "irrational" people in horror? How wide is your understanding of God's love?

Friday, October 4— Read Genesis 31:22-55— Laban pursued Jacob, and accused him of stealing flocks, daughters and the household gods. Violence hung ominously in the air. But God warned Laban, and Rachel craftily hid the gods that she, not Jacob, had taken. In the end, they made a covenant of peace. They set up a pillar of stone as a memorial and boundary, praised God and parted forever.

- After twenty years of deals made and broken, rubbing sharp elbows daily, Jacob and Laban had many grievances. But God led them to set aside their complaints and make peace. In what relationships would setting up a "Mizpah pillar" (verses 49-53) improve your life? What kind of help with your feelings would you need to do that?
- The first part of Jacob and Laban's talk is a classic Middle Eastern bazaar scene. The words twist and turn, sliding easily from compliments to condemnation. What are some ways you are tempted to use slippery speech in today's world? How does Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:34-37 challenge you?

Saturday, October 5— **Personal Application: Personal Application:** The Bible's characters were human, with dark sides as well as light. Jacob, like so many after him, kept turning to the Lord of Light, allowing the light to change his life more and more. Which direction are you facing now—toward or away from the Lord of Light? Choose one or more spiritual disciplines to practice daily, through which God can bring more and more light into your life.

Family Activity: Laban and Jacob often spoke to and treated one another unkindly. When Jacob chose to disappear with his two wives (who were also Laban's daughters), Laban pursued them. After more unkind words towards one another, Jacob and Laban decided to create a promise of peace. In all families, hurtful words are spoken. They can be divisive and crushing, causing conflict for moments, even years. In your home, establish a place of peace. Place a special rug or blanket in a central area. When arguments, fighting or name calling begin, encourage the family members to sit on the peace place. Here, remind them to listen, breathe deeply, read Scripture, pray and talk with one another. Practice peace, and with God's help, peace will become more of your family's practice.

Prayer: Dear God, we read about the good, the bad and the ugly of Jacob. We read of moments when he seems to do the right thing and moments when he clearly does the wrong thing. No matter where he is or what he does, you always watch over him. May we see that you have always been and will always be there for us, just as you were there for Jacob—and we are grateful. Amen.

Theme: Wrestling with God
“Jacob and his Two Wives”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton
September 28-29, 2013 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Genesis 29:16-20

16 Now Laban had two daughters. The older daughter was named Leah, and the younger one was Rachel. 17 There was no sparkle in Leah’s eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face. 18 Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, “I’ll work for you for seven years if you’ll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife.”

19 “Agreed!” Laban replied. “I’d rather give her to you than to anyone else. Stay and work with me.” 20 So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.

VIDEO Sermon Starter – Jacob and his Two Wives

SLIDE Jacob and his Two Wives

How do you think people entertain themselves in the days before television, video games and movies? My grandparents listen to the radio, but how did people entertain themselves in the days before radio? My great-grandmother read books, but how did people entertain themselves in the days before books? They told stories.

The ancient Hebrew people loved to tell stories. In the evenings around the family fire they would tell stories about their heroes in the days of old. They told stories about the patriarchs of the faith, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They told stories about what God had done among his people. In telling those stories they laughed and they cried. They learned about life and they learned about God and they learned about themselves.

The Hebrew people told thousands of stories before the Bible was ever written and most of them we don't have access to. The ones we do have access to, the ones which are the oldest stories, are found in the book of Genesis. These stories were deemed so important in helping the people understand who they were and who God is that they were told over and over again in a very meticulous fashion until they were finally written down and recorded and kept for us. Of those 50 chapters of stories in the book of Genesis, 25 of them have to do with Jacob and his family. This is why we have begun a series of sermons on Jacob, who is considered the father of the nation of Israel.

Some of you have asked me that since I am talking about these events as stories if

I really believe they are true. Yes, I do believe they are true because oral tradition has proved to be just as accurate as written tradition. We have to understand the stories based on real people who lived a very long time ago and they were told over and over again because they captured what life is like and they helped people understand in their day who God is and what God's will is for their lives.

Let's remember the first stories that we looked at last week from Jacob's life. Last week we focused on the birth of Jacob and how he was born a twin with his brother Esau. We learned in part one that Jacob was born a twin and he was the youngest of the two brothers. His older brother Esau came out hairy and we learned that is why his parents named him Esau which literally means "hairy." Jacob means, "he pulls the heel," because he came out holding his brother's heel but we also learned that this phrase means something similar to our phrase, "Are you pulling my leg?" Jacob's name literally means, "trickster," or, "deceiver."

We learned that Jacob lived into his name when he manipulated his brother Esau when they were teenagers. Jacob coaxed Esau into giving him a share of the inheritance in exchange for a bowl of red stew. Later we learned that Jacob's mother Rebecca coached Jacob into deceiving their sight impaired father, Isaac, by pretending to be Esau. He stole from Esau the deathbed blessing of their father by wearing some hairy gloves and a cloak that belonged to Esau so that Isaac thought Jacob was Esau when he gave the blessing.

When Esau discovered that Jacob had been deceitful and stolen his birthright and his blessing he wanted to kill his brother. Jacob was sent away by his mother Rebecca to the old country up North. She sent him there to find a family among her brother Laban's people. She told Jacob she would send for him when it was safe to come back to Canaan. In her lifetime, it was never safe for Jacob to come back and Rebecca died while Jacob was away.

At the end of last week's sermon we saw Jacob embarking for the old country of North which is modern-day central Syria. He goes by himself and he's afraid and discouraged. One night he goes to sleep under the stars and sets up a stone as his pillow. As he is sleeping he has a dream and in his dream he sees the stairway going to heaven with angels coming and going up and down the stairway.

Jacob sees God himself and God speaks to him and says, "Jacob, you are mine and I am yours. Your descendants will inherit this land and I will bless you and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you and your people." Jacob woke up and his life was changed. Seeing God and encountering him in that dream he believed in God, perhaps for the first time. Jacob came to really know God in that moment and that life wasn't really about him all the time. He had a conversion experience and his life and his

heart were changed. Jacob then tried to seek and live into what God was calling him to do and be a blessing to other people.

That's where we ended last week with Jacob's story. The next part of Jacob's story is about his two wives Rachel and Leah and we begin with a beautiful love story.

SLIDE A Beautiful Love story

With this back drop in mind, I would like you to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. You will find a Scripture passage listed across the top that we will be reading from today and then below that there is a space for you to take notes. I want to encourage you to do that because I hope you will learn a few things today that you might not have known otherwise about Jacob. I know I learned a lot preparing these messages and I hope you will also learn some keys to understanding the rest of Jacob's story.

Below that you will find meditation moments for each day and I am challenging every one of us to read through the story of Jacob. We won't read all 25 chapters in the book of Genesis that have to do with Jacob, but we will read significant portions of it so that we can know this story. These are foundational stories of the Bible as half of the book of Genesis is devoted to Jacob and his family. I want you to be familiar with the story and I am confident that it will speak to you today some 4000 years later. If you will just take a few moments each day then we will have together over the next four weeks read through most of Jacob's story. If you are watching at home or online you can download this resource off of our website right next to the video portion.

There are a number of wonderful love stories in the Bible, but the one we come to today is one of the most beautiful of all of them, the story of Jacob and Rachel. If you turn in your Bible to Genesis 29 we are going to be looking at this story from this section of the Scriptures. Jacob has had his dream and he determined to live differently than he has before. He continues his journey to Paddan-Aram.

SLIDE MAP of Ancient Near East in Time of Patriarchs – Jacob to Paddan-Aram (graphic)

In your bulletin you will find a map of the ancient near East in a time of patriarchs. Jacob has been living in the land of Canaan that you see here to the right of the Mediterranean Sea and which is modern-day Israel. He is traveled on foot along the path of this arrow to this region of Paddan-Aram and to the town of Haran which is that area at the very top of the circle around the region of Paddan-Aram. This has taken him months and when he finally arrives he is looking for the family that his mother Rebecca sent them to look for which is her brother Laban.

He comes to a well and there are a number of shepherds who have gathered

there with their sheep. Water was like gold for the people of that day and in that region to have water was important. This was a common well which had a huge stone on top of it to keep it from drying out. The stone was thick and heavy and it would take all of the shepherds working together to move this stone off the top of the well. The shepherds would gather and wait until all of them had come to the well and together they would push the stone off the top so they could get water for their sheep and themselves.

All of the shepherds have arrived except for one and Jacob arrives at the same time and says that he is from the land of Canaan and he is looking for his uncle Laban. He asks if any of them know who Laban is and they look at each other and they say, "Of course we know Laban. Why, here comes his daughter Rachel right now with her sheep. She is the last of the shepherds we are waiting on in order to move the stone."

Jacob looks at Rachel walking towards them and he is overcome with emotion. He has walked for months and not only did he come to a well with a family member, but a young woman which is what he has come looking for anyway because he was told to go and find his new wife in this region. As he sees Rachel approaching he is overcome by her beauty and he does what most men do, he tried to show off. Here is what we read in the text beginning at verse nine in chapter 29 of Genesis.

SLIDE 9 Jacob was still talking with them when Rachel arrived with her father's flock, for she was a shepherd. 10 And because Rachel was his cousin—the daughter of Laban, his mother's brother—and because the sheep and goats belonged to his uncle Laban, Jacob went over to the well and moved the stone from its mouth and watered his uncle's flock. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and he wept aloud. 12 He explained to Rachel that he was her cousin on her father's side—the son of her aunt Rebekah. So Rachel quickly ran and told her father, Laban.

My guess is that Jacob paid for that move with a chiropractor and massage therapist in the coming days, but none of that mattered to him in the moment. Jacob went back with Rachel and he had a homecoming and met family he had never met before. He met his uncle Laban and Rachel and Leah and the rest of the clan.

Most importantly, we are meant to notice this immediate sense of love between Jacob and Rachel as he is overcome with emotion and he kisses her and weeps aloud in the midst of that moment. Jacob works for Laban for a month and while he is working there he falls deeper in love with Rachel. At the end of one month Laban says to Jacob, "Son, it's not right that you would work for me for free. Name your price and I will pay you for working for me." We find this answer comes from Jacob as we read it again in Genesis 29 beginning at verse 16.

SLIDE 16 Now Laban had two daughters. The older daughter was named Leah,

and the younger one was Rachel. 17 There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face. 18 Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, "I'll work for you for seven years if you'll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife."

Jacob says that he will work for seven years in exchange for the opportunity to marry Rachel.

When I was a sophomore at the University of Colorado in Boulder I had become active at the Wesley Foundation which was the United Methodist campus ministry at CU. I decided over spring break to do an alternative trip and we went to Mexico City to do earthquake disaster relief after the large earthquake which killed hundreds of thousands outside of Mexico City. We stayed at a small Methodist Church and became very close to several of the families that were part of the church. There was a young girl named Maria that I connected with and I have a picture of the two of us you can see on the video screen.

SLIDE Jeff and Maria in Mexico (Picture)

Several of Maria's family members began to tease us, thinking that we were a couple which we were not. Her brother however pulled me aside one day and told me that I probably could not afford Maria as my wife and so I probably should not become too attached to her. He told me it would cost me three cows, two goats and a pig. I reassured him that I did not have three cows, two goats and a pig and so he had nothing to worry about. He then pointed to a young woman in our group who had just broken her arm falling from a ladder during our work trip named Nancy. I have a picture of Nancy and Maria together from that trip.

SLIDE Nancy and Maria in Mexico (Picture)

He told me that I was better off with Nancy because she wouldn't cost as much because she had a broken arm. He also had learned that Nancy could really cook and so he informed me that she would only cost two chickens and maybe not even that. I made sure not to tell Nancy any of this until we got on the plane home from Mexico.

SLIDE Jacob and Rachel

Jacob is almost 40 years old and he is willing to work for seven years in order to have Rachel's hand in marriage. It is worth noting several other things in the Scripture passage that we just read about Rachel and Leah. The version of the Bible that we read today from which is the New Living Translation says that, "**There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes.**" The word in Hebrew actually translates directly in English as the word "soft." Leah's eyes were soft. One way of reading this is that Leah's eyes were pretty or beautiful but the rest of her was not. You also can read this word as Leah having a sight impairment or she had some sort of problem with their eyes. Whichever the case, the

point of including this in the story is that it is meant to explain why Leah, as the older daughter, is not yet married. I know that when I first fell in love with my wife it was because of her eyes, which I still love to look at, and this passage makes it clear that no one has fallen in love with Leah because of her eyes.

Also recognize that this story is meant to be seen in connection with last week's story. The first part of Jacob's life is about two brothers, Jacob and Esau and their relationship. Esau was born hairy and reddish and made it clear that he was not the prettiest of babies. Jacob was born more of a pretty boy. Now we have these two sisters, Leah, who was born first, and had some sort of sight impairment or issue with her eyes, and Rachel who is described in the Scripture passage today as having a beautiful figure and a lovely face. Here is the picture of these two sisters and we are meant to see it as a parallel between these two brothers that we have just seen in the passages before.

We then read these words in verse 20.

SLIDE 20 So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.

Isn't that a beautiful picture? Jacob served seven years but it felt like a few days because he loved her so much. You also will notice that it says that Jacob waited to have intimate relations with her until they were married and so Jacob was in essence the 40-year-old Virgin +7 years to make in the 47-year-old virgin when they finally married. This was meant to demonstrate their depth of commitment to God and their love for each other.

SLIDE The Wedding Surprise

This leads us to the second part of today's story which is the wedding day surprise. Once again we are meant to read this story in relation to the story that we read last week, we read that Jacob is a trickster who tricks his brother into giving away his birthright and then tricks his father into giving him a blessing. Let's read beginning at verse 21 and Genesis 29.

SLIDE 21 Finally, the time came for him to marry her. "I have fulfilled my agreement," Jacob said to Laban. "Now give me my wife so I can marry her." 22 So Laban invited everyone in the neighborhood and prepared a wedding feast.

Before we continue the story let me remind you that in this day the bride would come with a heavy veil over her face so you couldn't see her. The priest did the ceremony and then there would be dancing and a party, all the while the bride would be veiled. Finally, the bride would be led to the wedding tent and the husband would then

enter and consummate their marriage in the darkness. There had probably been lots of drinking and this is how it worked so let's continue with verse 23.

SLIDE **23 But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her. 24 (Laban had given Leah a servant, Zilpah, to be her maid.)**
25 But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! “What have you done to me?” Jacob raged at Laban. “I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?” 26 “It’s not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn,” Laban replied. 27 “But wait until the bridal week is over, then we’ll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me.” 28 So Jacob agreed to work seven more years. A week after Jacob had married Leah, Laban gave him Rachel, too. 29 (Laban gave Rachel a servant, Bilhah, to be her maid.)
30 So Jacob slept with Rachel, too, and he loved her much more than Leah. He then stayed and worked for Laban the additional seven years.

An interesting side note is that in our weddings today the tradition for thousands of years has been that the groom is to lift the veil of the bride just before the wedding ceremony begins. This is the reason why, literally! This is where that tradition begins so you make sure you have the right bride before you say your vows.

You might wonder how it is that Jacob was fooled that night but remember that there was a heavy veil and there was lots of wine that evening as part of the party. By the time he has made his way into the tent it is dark and he has had a bit of wine and there is a woman waiting for him and he is the 47-year-old virgin. She doesn't say a word and they make love, and then he passes out. We are not going to make any comments about that today.

SLIDE **Jacob and Leah**

This story is told and is meant to be both humorous where there is some chuckling and then there is a moment of silence and then there is just sadness. Where is Rachel in this story? Presumably her father Laban has tied her up in the tents somewhere. Maybe she is gagged so she won't interrupt the festivities because her heart is about to be broken. This is the man that she loves and he is being tricked into marrying her sister. Her older sister is going to be given to the man that she loves?

What you think Leah is thinking during this time? Maybe she is okay with it because she doesn't like her little sister and she wants to get back at her for being the beautiful one. But maybe there are tears streaming down her face during the wedding ceremony because her father is making her do this. This is what she wants to do. She is tricking a man into marrying her and maybe this is not what she had hoped for on her

wedding day or dreamed about since she was a young girl. While she lays there in the darkness and her new husband makes love to her thinking that she is somebody else, is she holding back the tears or maybe biting her tongue in the midst of it? Is this how she imagined it would be on her wedding night? Or is she thinking, "I want my husband to want me."

What do you think she is praying or thinking about that whole night while Jacob is sleeping and she is waiting for him to wake up? Maybe she's praying, "Lord, please make him love me. Please make him want to be with me and not Rachel. Please Lord, change his heart and make him want to love me!"

But when morning comes that is not what happens. Can you see the tragedy in the midst of this story? It might be a humorous story first, but then you begin to understand that life has not worked out the way either Rachel or Leah or Jacob had thought it would.

Some of you have rightly noticed that 4000 years ago it was a tough time to be a woman. A father did whatever he had to do to make sure that his daughters were taken care of. Laban would one day die and he knew that he needed someone to take care of his daughters because there was no Social Security. The property belonged to men in just about every culture 4000 years ago and so women needed to be connected to men to be taken care of. Laban would have been looking for years for someone to marry Leah because of her weak eyes and no one would do it. Here was his chance now and in the end he would give Rachel to Jacob but this was an opportunity to make sure that both of his daughters were cared for. Whether we like it or not, this is the story of a father trying to take care of his kids, but none of us would want to go back and live in that time.

SLIDE The desperate need to be loved

Jacob's stories were a tragic comedy and today we might think of television series like *Desperate Housewives*. We have Leah in the story who is desperate and desires to be loved. This should be an element in the story that we can all relate to because every one of us long to be loved. We want to be the apple of someone's eye. We want someone to look at us and treasure us and see us as important and really want to be with us.

If we are married and our marriage is struggling, the truth is that both partners probably want more than anything else to be loved. He wants to feel like she really wants to be with him. She wants to feel like he really treasures her. When we are not married we are looking for this because we are all looking to be loved and Leah is no exception.

The problem is that she was longing to be loved by a man who could only give her

so much because he had been tricked into marrying her. Jacob provided a good home for her and everything that was necessary and he tried to care for her, but he couldn't conjure up something that wasn't there to begin with. Jacob loved Rachel and that part is clear from the beginning of this story.

Leah goes about then trying to win Jacob's love. Let's listen to how this plays itself out in Genesis 29:31 – 34. There seems to be a presumption or understanding that some time has gone by and Leah has not felt loved.

SLIDE 31 When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to have children, but Rachel could not conceive. 32 So Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "The Lord has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me." 33 She soon became pregnant again and gave birth to another son. She named him Simeon, for she said, "The Lord heard that I was unloved and has given me another son." 34 Then she became pregnant a third time and gave birth to another son. She named him Levi, for she said, "Surely this time my husband will feel affection for me, since I have given him three sons!"

Do you think Jacob now love Leah? No, she could have had 20 children and he wasn't going to love her because he loved Rachel. But let's notice what happens next in verse 35.

SLIDE 35 Once again Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah, for she said, "Now I will praise the Lord!" And then she stopped having children.

Remember that in verse 31 it says that the Lord saw that Leah was unloved and he gave her this gift of a child. These children were a gift from God because Leah felt unloved and then finally after the fourth child she realizes and she turned her heart to God and she gives praise to God and recognizes what God has done for her.

Sometimes when we read the Old Testament we think of God as being very harsh or mean or wrathful. We love the God of the New Testament, but the God of the Old Testament seems uncaring or uncompassionate. But if we read a bit more carefully we see in this story like this where God looks at a woman who was unloved and to have soft eyes and God says something very clearly to her as she gives birth, ***"Leah, I love you. I think you are perfect just the way you are. I think you are beautiful. I love you. I love you and you are a gift and these children will be a gift to you."***

God gives Leah these children not as a bribe so that Jacob will love her, but God gave her these children as a way of saying, ***"Leah, I love you already. Jacob may never love you the way that you want, but I already love you more than you can possibly imagine or believe."***

The power of love is pretty astounding. When you know that you are loved you live in a different way than when you are constantly trying to see if you could win someone else's affection. The overarching message of the Bible is this: even if no one else loves you, God already loves you. You were made by God to be loved by God. When we study the Scriptures we find this message throughout the Old Testament but in case we didn't get it when we moved to the New Testament this is the dominant theme. That's why the passage of Scripture that most of you have memorized or you have heard or you see it written in a football player's eye black or on the back of the football or in the end zone and touches your heart. John 3:16-17.

SLIDE ***16 "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.***

Jesus was the embodiment of that love and we are meant to see the depth of God's love in his life, death and resurrection. God loves the losers and the sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors and everybody else who feels like they are unlovable. In the gospel of John we are told that just before Jesus's death we are going to see the full extent of God's love for us. Jesus does this by first washing the feet of his disciples and then willingly being crucified. Jesus says this in that same time. In the gospel of John, chapter 15 we read these words.

SLIDE ***12 This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. 13 There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.***

The Scripture then goes on to tell us that Jesus lay down his life for us. The apostle Paul writes to the people of Ephesus and Ephesians 3 that he is praying for them this prayer. If you get nothing else out of today's sermon you might write down this Scripture and just carry it with you if you are struggling to feel loved.

SLIDE ***14 When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, 15 the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. 16 I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. 17 Then Christ will make his home in your heart as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. 18 And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. 19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. 20 Now all glory to God, who is able,***

through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. 21 Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

You might also take this Scripture with you and memorize it on your hearts from Romans 8:38 – 39.

SLIDE 38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing can separate you from a love that is relentless, unconditional, grace filled for you from God. I was 16 years old when I discovered that love. My stepfather's drinking had become full-blown and I did as much as I could to stay far away from our house. I began attending the youth group in our church every week and I began hearing people say over and over again that God knew my name and God loved me. At first I didn't believe that and I wasn't sure there even was a God given what was happening to me in my life.

My youth pastor Wayne Lavendar was the first person to look directly my eyes and tell me that I couldn't do anything to earn God's love but it was just a free gift and God loved me whether I liked it or not. God loved my pimples and my braces and the fact that I wasn't yet 5 feet tall and I was a junior in high school. God love the fact that I wrote a 10 speed bicycle, yes they used to make bikes only 10 speeds, and I didn't have a car!

Finally I trusted and began to experience that God knew my name. God knew my story and God loves me and it changed everything. My life went on to a different trajectory because of that moment and that realization.

When you live your life in the love of God, knowing that God loves you already, then you can wake up every day and feel that love in your life. You live differently because you are not operating in life out of a deficit. You have something to give away and you're not always desperately trying to get something because you already have it. This is why you need to come to worship every week because the world will convince you otherwise and you will forget.

One other thing to note about this part of Jacob's life is that he could've done a better job of helping Leah to feel loved. He might not have felt that but he could've shown it to her and told her how special she was and pointed out special things about her which is part of our job as people of faith. I have a friend who tries with everyone he

needs to say something special about them. He tries to encourage them and lift them up and sometimes just speaking the words to someone who is operating out of the deficit is all they need that day. Our task is to live out the love of God that we have first experienced in our lives.

SLIDE Rachel's story

That leads us to the last part of this time in Jacob's life and Rachel's infertility. While Leah feels unloved and gets to have children and eventually praises God for the children, Rachel is loved by her husband but she is not able to have children. She is wrestling with infertility. As she and Jacob are wrestling with infertility it begins to put a strain on their relationship. Leah has been jealous of Rachel because Rachel has the love of Jacob, but Rachel becomes jealous of Leah because Leah has the children.

Those of you who have wrestled with infertility, you know firsthand the struggle and the strain is put on your relationship and the pain that is involved. Imagine that your spouse has another spouse and they are having babies and you are not and what that might look like and feel like. This takes infertility to a whole new level and Rachel is feeling this jealousy and this pain of not being able to have children.

In the midst of this struggle in their relationship we actually have recorded in Scripture one of their fights between a husband and wife. It's unusual to find in Scripture a husband and wife fighting but we have one here in Genesis 30:1-2.

SLIDE 1 When Rachel saw that she wasn't having any children for Jacob, she became jealous of her sister. She pleaded with Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" 2 Then Jacob became furious with Rachel. "Am I God?" he asked. "He's the one who has kept you from having children!"

First, notice the depth of the pain of Rachel as she said, "Give me children, or I'll die!" I've been with people and sat with couples who have felt like this. I want to be sure and recognize that for those of you who struggle with infertility the Bible is a bit of a mixed bag. On the one hand there is the comfort of knowing that so many holy people struggled with infertility. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Elizabeth and Zachariah, who became the parents of John the Baptist and on and on we see stories of infertility in the Bible. If all of these people wrestled with infertility and God loved them deeply, then what might that say about those who struggle with infertility today? It tells us that God loves us even in these dark places.

While that is a powerful and comforting thought, the downside is that there are certain places in the Scripture that would seem to imply that God has closed up someone's womb or opened up someone's womb. In other words, it seems to say that fertility is about a decision that God makes and not some physiological issue. Part of what we need to recognize is that the Bible is written in a prescientific era where people

didn't understand what led to infertility. They knew they were doing what everyone else does to have babies and it was not happening so it must be God's doing. They didn't understand anything about how fertility really worked and how we understand things today.

There is one other thing we should remember when reading passages like this. While on one hand the people may have thought this was God's will that they couldn't have children, on the other hand they were still doing everything they could do have children. It's not like they stopped trying to have children so clearly they may have talked this way but they still kept trying and didn't really believe that God was not allowing them to have children. If you read your Meditation Moments this week you will read a story about Leah's son coming home with mandrakes. Rachel says to Leah, "You can have Jacob tonight if you will give me the mandrakes."

That seems kind of weird. What's that all about? These were ancient medicinal remedies for infertility. Already in this story, 4000 years ago, while Jacob said something about God closing up Rachel's womb, they are still trying things because they are not certain that it is God that has closed up the womb. Maybe God does want them to have children so they will try anything and everything.

After this strange interaction we find an interesting pattern of surrogacy that we're going to look at in just a minute. Both Rachel and Leah give surrogate mothers to Jacob so they can have more children and then adoption takes place. You will learn all about this mixed bag of things around infertility when you read more of Jacob's story this week in the Meditation Moments.

There is one last thing I want to be sure to say about this issue with infertility. Sometimes there are well-meaning Christians who love God and love you and they will say things like, "Well, it must be the will of God that you are not having children."

4000 years ago people may have said that but today we actually understand some of the causes of infertility. Let me just caution you that what you say something like that to someone it feels like a dagger that is driven into their hearts. Let me put it this way. If you had gallstones how would you feel if someone said, "It must be the will of God that you have gallstones." If you have cancer, did God give you cancer? Does God give women endometriosis? Does God give men low sperm count? Did God cause a host of other things that lead to infertility?

If we actually believe that then we shouldn't even get cancer treatments or even bother to get healthcare because whatever we get is clearly what God wanted us to have. If you try to heal from that then you're fighting against God, right? So stop taking medication when you get sick and just deal with it because it must be God's will!

The truth is that we don't think that way so why would we think that way when it

comes to infertility or any of the other areas that we struggle with what our bodies don't do what we want to do. We do pray and we entrusted to God and we pray that God will use the doctors and nurses and medical procedures and medications. We trust God no matter what happens that somehow God will use whatever happens in our lives to bring about something good.

If you are struggling with infertility we have Stephen Ministers who will walk with you through that experience. I think you will be blessed by being with others who have walked in your shoes. Immediately following the service we have Stephen Ministers who would be willing to pray with you if you need healing in your life for God's touch upon you for whatever you are struggling with today.

I want to encourage all of us to be careful about how we speak about these things and recognize that even 4000 years ago there other ways they might go about the process of dealing with infertility.

What happens next is that Rachel finally comes to a point where she believes she will never have children. Then she takes her maidservant Bilhah and says to Jacob, "I want you to sleep with Bilhah and she'll be my surrogate and you will bear me children through her." This is our work in those days. This is our work for Abraham two generations before Jacob. The maidservant would bear the child and Rachel would've held Bilhah in her arms when she was giving birth. Once a child was born it would've been handed over to Rachel and she would've adopted the child. This is how it worked in those days.

So Leah has four children and then she stopped bearing children. Bilhah now has two children per Rachel and Leah is pretty upset about that because she thought she was special and the only one who is going to give Jacob children. She didn't have Jacob's heart but she had his children and now Rachel has two children. Leah can't have any more children so she turns to her maidservant Zilpah and says, "Zilpah, I want you to sleep with Jacob now and then I will have two adopted children through you."

Jacob sleeps with Zilpah and so now we have four children with Leah and two children with Bilhah and two children with Zilpah. Then, amazingly, Leah is able to have children again and she has three more kids, two boys and a girl. Now we are up to 11 children, 10 boys and one girl. Finally, when she is approaching the age where she can have children anymore, God sees the pain of Rachel and she conceived and has a child. She has a son named Joseph who becomes Jacob's favorite son. The rest of the book of Genesis is about Jacob's favorite son Joseph and of course his amazing Technicolor dream coat. Jacob is now in his 60s and Rachel in her 40s and she is blessed with the surprise of Joseph.

All of this tells us a couple of different things that we should remember as we

close this chapter of Jacob's life. First of all, this was a really mixed up family. Jacob seems to come home every night and have to wonder who is sleeping with that night. You have for moms and one dad and one messed up family system that is the epitome of dysfunction. But God still use them to bring about something beautiful as these children became the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

SLIDE God can work through any family

Your family may be dysfunctional but God can even use that dysfunction to do something beautiful because of his grace and mercy. We also see that while Jacob and Rachel love each other deeply this story didn't unfold the way they expected and it hardly ever does. No marriage is perfect. These two love each other deeply but they had their problems and issues and challenges. They had heart ache and heartbreak.

SLIDE God works through heart ache and heartbreak

This is how it is for all of us. I have done 14 weddings this summer and fall and while all of them were beautiful weddings I know that each of those couples will experience heart ache and heartbreak at some point in their lives. There will be moments where the hate each other and moments they fight. There will be lots of moments in between where they love each other and that is life, and God can work through each of those moments. It was true for Jacob and Rachel and it will be true for each of us.

As we close let's look at what happens at the end of Rachel's life in chapter 35. After 20 years of living in Pannan-Aram Jacob takes his entire family back to the land of Canaan. There he will meet Esau again and will look at that next week. Jacob begins to move his family South and Rachel conceives one last time. She is probably in her late 40s and it is a complete surprise. My guess is she thought there was no way she become pregnant. There is excitement and joy as Jacob is near 70 and let's listen to what happens in verse 16 and following.

SLIDE 16 Leaving Bethel, Jacob and his clan moved on toward Ephrath. But Rachel went into labor while they were still some distance away. Her labor pains were intense. 17 After a very hard delivery, the midwife finally exclaimed, “Don’t be afraid—you have another son!” 18 Rachel was about to die, but with her last breath she named the baby Ben-oni (which means “son of my sorrow”). The baby’s father, however, called him Benjamin (which means “son of my right hand”). 19 So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). 20 Jacob set up a stone monument over Rachel’s grave, and it can be seen there to this day.

Who is the right-hand of Jacob? Rachel was the right-hand and the woman he loved and who died in childbirth bearing their last child. This is the story of the tragic

happens in people's lives. It happens to people that God loves dearly. For all of us there are tragedies and heartache and heartbreak in life. It happened to Jacob and Rachel.

She died in Jacob erected a pillar in her name and that pillar is still standing today even though this book was written at minimum 450 years after the time it Jacob lived. In the book of 1 Samuel we read at the pillar was still standing some 700 years after the time that Rachel and Jacob lived. What does that tell you about the depth of Jacob's love for his wife? He loved her dearly. Tragedy happened and this is life.

Jacob lived another 70 years and just before he died he is having a conversation with his son Joseph and you know what he is talking about? He talks about the sorrow he felt 70 years earlier. It is the sorrow he would carry for the rest of his life and the loss of his wife.

Jacob and Rachel story is the story of a beautiful love. It is a picture of two people who care for one another and love one another until the very end, even with great challenges and sorrows in life.

Let's also remember about Leah who long to be loved by a husband who would never love her in the way that she hoped. Which she came to understand is something that I hope we understand—that we are already loved by God regardless of the people around us. I imagine that when Leah died and entered the kingdom of heaven that God took her face in his hands and said, "Leah, please understand that I loved you every moment of every day." I picture God kissing her eyes and say, "I want you know that I think your eyes are beautiful. They were the most beautiful part of you."

Leah and Rachel and Jacob's story reminds us that life is sometimes hard. Dysfunction happens in every family. And God loves you. Let's pray...

SLIDE Prayer

With your heads bowed and your eyes closed would you start by simply saying quietly under your breath, *"Thank you God for loving me..."*

"I receive your love..."

"Help me to trust in your love..."

"Help me to live in your love..."

"Help me to reflect your love to others..."

God how grateful we are for this love that you have for us. Bless your people. Help us to know that we are loved. Help us to walk with you, to follow you, to live for you and to love in your name. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.