

Life's Disappointments

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Genesis 29:15-28

29:15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

29:16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.

29:17 Leah's eyes were weak (NRSV lovely), and Rachel was graceful and beautiful.

29:18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

29:19 Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."

29:20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

29:21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

29:22 So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast.

29:23 But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her.

29:24 (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.)

29:25 When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"

29:26 Laban said, "This is not done in our country--giving the younger before the firstborn.

29:27 Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years."

29:28 Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Romans 8:26-39

8:26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

8:27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

8:28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

8:29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.

8:30 And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

8:31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

8:32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

8:33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

8:34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

8:35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

8:36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

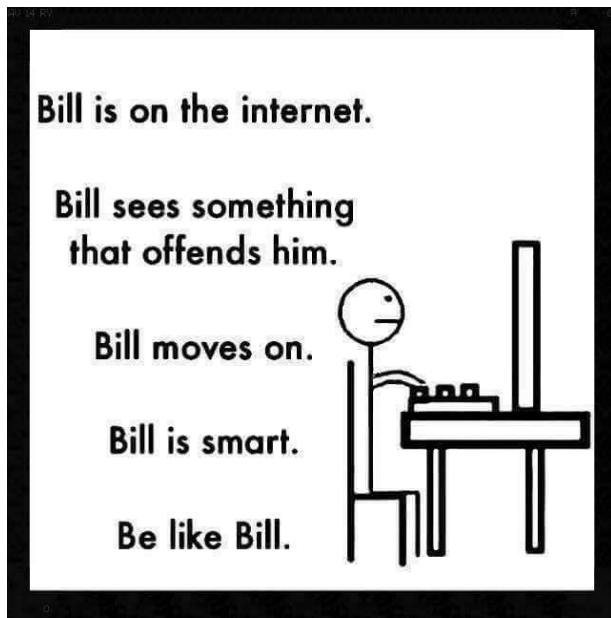
8:37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

8:38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

8:39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Proclamation of the Word

Perhaps you have seen the memes going around. There is a stick figure character called Bill and the little cartoon reads things like...



These little internet public service announcements have been floating around the internet. "Be like Bill" is the message. When I read the Genesis text for today, I am left wondering who are we called to be like? No real role models here, it seems.

There is Jacob- the one who cheated his brother out of his birthright and his dying father's blessing, is running for his life. He falls for the beautiful Rachel, daughter of his uncle Laban. Jacob is on the lam and in love. He agrees to be an indentured servant, gets duped, and marries the sister Leah, the one with weak eyes, by accident.

There is Laban- Laban takes advantage of Jacob's hunger and his hormones. He trades his daughters for Jacob's service. He cheats and gives his daughter Leah, the oldest to Jacob in marriage.

Then there is the daughters, Rachel and Leah, who are victims of their father's treatment which some label abuse by today's standards. They are expected to produce children, but have to resort to sharing their maids Bilhah and Zilpah with their shared husband. As we say in the South, "This is a hot mess!"

Sometimes in premarital counseling we will do a family Genogram. As each person sketches their family in a graph, you can begin to see patterns in relationships. It is more than a family tree. Each person writes things about the family member and the relationships. You would note any diseases or habits, social behaviors or disorders, as well as information about birth, death, and so on. If we were to graph the Jacob and Rachel/Leah Genogram a pattern emerges. Cheating is what Craig Barnes calls "something of a family problem."

Jacob has met his match. He is getting his comeuppance some would say. What goes around comes around. He is in love with Rachel and is duped into marrying Leah who must have kept the bridal veil on all night. Jacob is not the only one that knows how to use a disguise. Things are not working out the way he planned.

The Bible puts it this way, "And when morning came, it was Leah!"

Disappointment is all around. We know Jacob is disappointed. Jacob asks Laban, what have you done to me? What about Leah? Who knows how Leah and Rachel feel about the whole matter. Their lives are part of a business transaction. Then to top it all off, there will be infertility and disappointments to come. Life can be disappointing!

And when morning came, it was Leah!

I wonder if we all don't have those moments. The morning after, things look different. One day we wake up and think this is not the life I expected to have. If we are honest there is the potential for these moments in any kind of job, or marriage, or relationships. Reality sets in and when morning came, it was Leah!

Stanley Hauerwas, a Christian Ethicist at Duke Divinity school, wrote a book on marriage. And he begins his book by saying, "You always marry the wrong person."

Meaning the image in your mind is that you will marry the right person. The fantasy person that we believe we marry where life will be bliss and happiness, days of wine and roses. Never a cross word or conflict. Of course, there comes a day when the honeymoon is over.

I recall meeting with a young couple planning to marry. I had to stop them in the middle of the session and help them see. She did not want to become a mother. I heard that very clearly. He so wanted to

be a Daddy and thought she would come around, some hormone would kick in eventually, like it was built in. I had to call a time out, look at him and say, "Did you hear what she just said?" What we hope to be true can lead to disappointment. He was hoping for a Rachel...

And when morning came, it was Leah!

People move to Clemson for opportunity or a change of pace thinking it will be fabulous. Best place to live. You get here and you learn things about local politics or the economy or the traffic, and when morning came, it was Leah!

Or we are in a phase of life where are kids are either looking at college or there, and when you take the 10 cent tour, you think this is wonderful. I will study hard, play hard, cheer hard, and make all sorts of new friends. Then you get there. It is harder to find good friends and classes are tougher then you imagined

And when morning came, it was Leah!

Look at the nation. We want a strong democracy, freedom, and well-being of our citizens. Then you pick up the morning paper and see the headlines or read the twitter feed...

And when morning came, it was Leah!

It happens in churches. We treat church like the latest gadget- "church shopping" is a term prior generations did not know. We go looking for what feels good, what suits our social agendas, or personal needs. Then we get there and reality sets in... And when morning came, it was Leah!

We do this when we serve in missions. We think, I'll go help out at the church this week with Family Promise. I'll spend an hour in conversation with the parents, their lives will be turned around. He will score a job at Oconee Power plant, the children will be angels, and they'll be living in Country Walk next.

And when morning came, it was Leah!

We do this with God. We expect God to be like an ATM where we can pop in when we need something, and God will fix it. We expect to have a relationship with God without spending anytime with God. And we want the good stuff from God, but not the discipline or the hard lessons or the sacrifice. And then there is Jesus who was supposed to swoop in and kill the Romans and ended up dying on a cross.

And when morning came, it was Leah!

Or maybe it is you or me. We all look forward to a great life when we are young. You plan it, prepare for it, pray for it. You planned on being a Rachel. Then one day you look in the mirror one morning....and it was Leah.

When the newness wears off, reality sets in. Disappointment comes.

And when you are in the middle of that disappointment, wallowing in your own self-pity, the thing that grates on your nerves the most is when a well-meaning someone quotes something like Romans 8:28 "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

When you work 7 years for Rachel and you end up with Leah, this is not what you want to hear.

Sometimes life throws us a curve ball, and we may be beyond just disappointment. You may be in full on crisis. Richard Rohr in his book Falling Upward describes this experience when some kind of falling happens. "A job, fortune, or reputation is lost...a death has to be suffered, a house has to be flooded, or a disease has to be endured." The crisis can be devastating. The crisis undoes you. The flood doesn't just flood your house—it washes out your spiritual life. What you thought you knew about living the spiritual life no longer suffices for the life you are livingⁱ.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose....even if it doesn't feel that way!

But at some point, either we run away, try to escape, or we accept reality. We might be looking for a quick fix because our lives have come undone. We are falling, but for God that is exactly when God gets to work- in weakness, in failures, in disappointments.

The Holy Spirit is at work we realize. Listen again

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

We are falling upward, according to Richard Rohr because we learn that we can depend on God. We discover that God has not abandoned us! And secondly, we learn that it is when we fall that we grow. Rohr writes, "We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right." Eventually, we learn to live and love the life we have.

Jean Vanier, who founded the Christian L'Arche communities for persons with disabilities. (L'arche means ark) He has given the last 52 years to loving and serving those the world sees as weak or broken....the Leahs with the weak eyes. Vanier himself is learning to live with his own aging and weakness. He is falling upward, Richard Rohr would say.

On an *On Being* with Krista Tippett interview, Vanier says he is learning,

... I'm human. And I have my weaknesses and I have my fragility, physical ailments of the heart, I have to take things quietly. And intellectually, I get tired much more quickly. So it's just the acceptance of reality. And you see, the big thing for me is to love reality and not live in the imagination, not live in what could have been or what should have been or what can be to this reality, and somewhere to love reality and then discover that God is present in the reality. That doesn't mean to say that we're just to be passive to welcome reality, because we also have to know how to react in front of reality...ⁱⁱ

Perhaps in his lifelong pursuit of loving God and loving others, he is learning to love himself, too. He goes on to say that he has noticed that others seeing his weakness, his need, are able to show him more love and tenderness. It is a gift of God's grace.

So perhaps I was wrong about no role models to follow in this Scripture. Maybe we are all Leahs. Because it is in our weakness, our limitations that we get to experience the work of the Spirit interceding. And not just the Spirit, but Jesus. It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Nothing can separate us from that love.

The biblical writer says, "Leah had weak eyes." It is in our weakness that we can know the depth, height and breadth of the love of God from which we cannot be separated. When we love, we are most like the God who first loved us. Jesus had weak eyes. For he wept when he heard his friend Lazarus had died. Jesus on the cross, wept for love of us who in our brokenness and sin do not know what we do. God the Father wept for his Son who suffered on the cross out of love for him. C.S. Lewis wrote:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is in learning to love the Leahs, beside us or within us, that we will know the freedom and joy that comes through Christ who works all things together for good. It is after all, Leah who is the many times great grandmother of Jesus of Nazareth.

ⁱ Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward; Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011)

ⁱⁱ Krista Tippett, "Jean Vanier; the Wisdom of Tenderness" *On Being with Krista Tippett*, May 28, 2015 onbeing.org/programs/jean-vanier-the-wisdom-of-tenderness/

ⁱⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960)