

Pastor's Message – 7/30/23
Genesis 29:15-28

Anybody remember? Anybody still watch “The Young and the Restless?” “How about “General Hospital” or “The Guiding Light?” “Peyton Place?” “The Bold and the Beautiful?” How about “As the World Turns?” Soap operas are still in existence. They have been part of our culture for a long time; there may be new ones today. This week, perhaps, we have an episode of “As the Bible Turns.”

Doesn't the Old Testament read like a soap opera sometimes? According to Wikipedia, “The main characteristics that define soap operas are an emphasis on family life, personal relationships, sexual dramas, emotional and moral conflicts; some coverage of topical issues; set in familiar domestic interiors with only occasional excursions into new locations. Soap narratives, like those of film melodramas, are marked by what can be described as 'chance meetings, coincidences, missed meetings, sudden conversions, last-minute rescues and revelations, *deus ex machina* endings.'”

This week's reading from Genesis may need a rating of at least PG-13, maybe even TV-MA. In this case, not just parents, but mainstream U.S. culture may be strongly cautioned about both the sexual themes and the marital practices involved.

U.S. culture neither believes in nor condones polygamy. While arranged marriages are permissible in the United States, what Laban does here could be seen as a violation of contract law. Worse, he seems almost to be engaged in a form of human trafficking, selling his daughters in exchange for labor. What of the rights and voices of the women involved? What of Leah, required by her father to bed a man who does not love her? What of Rachel who expected Jacob to be hers alone, or at least first? And what of Zilpah, Leah's maid, “given” to Leah by Laban?

This already dysfunctional family system—one that has already cast out a legitimate child and his mother (Ishmael and Hagar) as I mentioned at the ecumenical worship service at Celebrate Waupun, allowed a younger son to trick his father and steal his brother's birthright and blessing (Rebekah, Jacob and Esau)—now is shown to be even more dysfunctional—two wives in a week, the “wrong one” first. That alone, without the previous history, would have pointed to trouble to come. And it doesn't help that to obtain the wife he actually wants; Jacob must put in yet another seven years of service beyond what he had already provided.

Jacob the trickster is tricked, perhaps learning something or getting a kind of retribution for the pain he had inflicted by his trickery in his family of origin aimed at overturning his culture's strict firstborn rules.

This time Jacob, aka "the grabber," does not get what he wants, and learns he can't grab it, either. It's another story of deceit in the Bible and the story of the first families of the Bible.

It reminds me of the story of a wealthy old lady who decided to go on a photo safari in Africa, and took her faithful aged poodle named Cuddles along for the company.

One day the poodle started chasing butterflies, and before long Cuddles discovered that she was lost. As she wandered about, she noticed a leopard heading rapidly in her direction -- with the intention of having lunch -- having her for lunch.

The old poodle thought, "Oh, oh! I'm in deep doo-doo now!" She noticed some bones on the ground close by, and she immediately settled down to chew on the bones with her back to the approaching cat. Just as the leopard was about to leap, the old poodle exclaimed loudly, "Boy, that was one delicious leopard! I wonder if there are any more around here?"

Hearing this, the young leopard halted his attack in mid-strike; a look of terror came over him and he slinked away into the trees. "Whew!" said the leopard, "that was close! That old poodle nearly had me!"

Meanwhile, a monkey who had been watching the whole scene from a nearby tree figured he could put this knowledge to good use and trade it for protection from the leopard. So off he went; but the old poodle saw him heading after the leopard with great speed and figured that something must be up. The monkey soon caught up with the leopard, spilled the beans, and struck a deal for himself with the leopard.

The young leopard, furious at being made a fool of, said to the monkey, "Here, hop on my back and see what's going to happen to that conniving canine!"

Now, the old poodle saw the leopard coming with the monkey on his back and thought "What am I going to do now?" But instead of running, the dog sat down with her back to her attackers, pretending that she hadn't seen them yet, and just when they got close enough to hear, the old poodle said: "Where's that darn monkey? I sent him off an hour ago to bring me another leopard!"

Well, back to the Bible and our story for today. Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and, in the late night, he went in to her... and, well you know what happens next. Morning came, 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 (Genesis 29:22-23, 25)?"

Today's Scripture lesson is a story of clichés: "What goes around comes around." "You reap what you sow." "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword." Well, it's happening here. Jacob had tricked his brother, Esau, out of not only his inheritance (when he traded him the bowl of stew for his inheritance). He'd also tricked him out of his father's blessing (when he dressed in some of his brother's clothing and fastened the hairy skin of a young goat on his hands and neck to fool his nearly blind father, Isaac). Then his father-in-law, Laban, tricked him by giving him Leah rather than Rachel as his wife. How could God ever use a person as deceitful, as untrustworthy, as Jacob?

These are the stories of biblical families. "As the Bible Turns."

"Our church is like a family," claim many Christians. By that they mean a nuclear family, a small social unit in which people are very close. The institution portrayed in the Old Testament is better described as that of a household.

Biblical households were large and complex social institutions, comprising dozens -- in some cases, hundreds -- of individuals, with clearly-understood lines of priority and power. In larger households, not every member was on intimate terms with every other. For those enjoying priority status (those who were not hired hands or slaves), the institution of polygamy made for even greater complexity. The children of favored wives, such as Rachel, tended to lord it over the others, often with disastrous results (just ask Joseph, sprawled at the bottom of the abandoned cistern where his brothers had thrown him).

When it comes to "biblical family values," be careful what you wish for or, at least, how you define and understand "biblical family values."

We might see today's biblical family as a dysfunctional family. That term -- *dysfunctional family* - has a useful clinical meaning when applied to deeply troubled or seriously abusive families, ones in which the adults consistently fail to fulfill their family responsibilities. These are people who've hit rock bottom and are still digging.

But what I want to lift up today are typical families that sometimes get branded as dysfunctional. We see a family going through a rough spot and somebody says, "Oh, they're so dysfunctional."

Or people look back at their upbringing and say, "I grew up in a dysfunctional family," when all they mean is that their *parents didn't understand them very well* and made them stand in the corner when they misbehaved. Used non-clinically, dysfunction can mean simply that the dynamics between family members *don't work* effectively. In fact, it usually implies that some of the family dynamics actually get in the way of things working well.

So, if that's the way we're going to use "dysfunctional," then *almost every family is dysfunctional at one time or another.*

And even further, families can be dysfunctional in certain areas and not in others. For example, a particular family might not be very good at handling schedule conflicts but might be quite good at supporting one another emotionally. Another family may not be very good at emotional support but let one member become seriously ill or badly injured, and everybody pulls together to take care of things for the sidelined person.

Truth is, before any of us stamp our families as "dysfunctional," we should first have to complete this statement: "One thing that my family does pretty well is" and where do we still see God's hand at work and God's blessings all around us?

I have no doubt that there have been, are, and certainly will be times and situations in your life wherein things will not work out the way you want them too and times and situations where you may feel *they* are out to get you and times and situation where it might be difficult to see God's hand at work. There may be times and situations wherein you make poor decisions and they come back to bite you.

In an imperfect world, marred by selfishness and an imbalance of power, you will not get precisely what you want. And it's best that God does not allow that to happen, because selfish and self-centered as we are, what we want may not be good for us or for society. God's desire for us quite likely lies between what we and what those with whom we contend want, just like God balanced Jacob's love agenda with what was good for Rachel's sister, through the maneuverings of Laban. This Bible Lesson teaches us to say with Benjamin Franklin to "Love your enemies; for they will tell you all your faults." Living with the gift of faith, the freedom to compromise, and with this sort of realism about our flaws, brings the Kingdom of Heaven a little closer – not just for us but also for those around us.

God's hand is at work sometimes beyond our sight and perception, but there are certain truths that we can hold with certainty. Even families or Churches that don't function as well as we'd like are the place to be if real love is present. There will be times in our lives when we will be the victims of deceit and double-cross; how we handle those times are a sign of our faith and trust in God-at-work. We may feel, that at those times, God has abandoned us – left us alone and on our own. However, it seems to me that from our story from Genesis today and knowing how the story turns out, that God is present and at work in every situation and can change deceit and dysfunction into truth and love.