

Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 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? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 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. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.

Genesis 29:15-20, 25-28

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now 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; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

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?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country - giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

Sermon

It was 1996. Somehow I was accepted to an honors week for incoming freshman to college (I'm still not sure how that happened). Anyway, there were about twenty of us that gathered a week before the rest of the students. And she was one of them. I noticed her right away, curly hair, laughter and smiles - she was beautiful. Over the first few months, this group continued to hang out together, getting together and laughing and sharing stories. That is how I learned about her favorite restaurant and her favorite shows that she used to watch with her dad. So when I finally got up the nerve to ask her out, I already knew which Movie we would see and what restaurant we would eat at. That is how I came to ask Sarah out for the first time. That was how our love story began.

How much do you remember about Jacob's story? Jacob was the son of Isaac, a twin with his brother Esau. It was Esau that was born first, making him the eldest son, the inheritor of the family property and responsibility. But Jacob was a cunning youth. He conned his brother out of his birthright for a bowl of soup. He conned his senile father out of a blessing by pretending to be his brother. And thus started a feud between Jacob and Esau, one in which Jacob had to runaway to protect his life.

And as he went looking for a safe place to live and make his way, he came toward his uncle Laban's property. But before he got there, he came upon a great well where shepherds had gathered from all around to water their flocks. And as Jacob was in conversation, she appeared, watering the flocks of her father's house. She was beautiful and Jacob fell in love that very minute, even before learning that this was the youngest daughter of Laban's.

And so when he arrives in front of Laban, Jacob presents himself as someone wanting to work. "But what will I pay you, you need to be paid." "I'll work for 7 years, and then you can pay me by allowing me to marry Rachel." It was a deal. But seven years later, Jacob awakens to the morning light only to discover that it was not Rachel under the veil, but it was Laban's oldest daughter, Leah. In a divine sense of justice, Laban had conned the con man, not just out of seven years, but out of an additional seven. But for Jacob, seven years was like seven days and fourteen years was nothing.

Think back to your own story. Maybe it was letters, or emails, or texts depending on what generation you are. Maybe it was the way you remembered every detail about the other, everything that they liked, that they didn't like, the way they laughed. Maybe there was some stupid stuffed animal that meant the world for a time or a type of flower that always made them smile. Now think about those first 14 years, the changes that occurred, the life that shifted. New homes and new jobs, children added and purposes shifted. And new ways to show them that you love them. And the first fourteen years was just the beginning.

In Romans, I have to share that this is one of my favorite texts of all the Bible. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Here we find the greater love story laid out. From Genesis to Revelation. From the moment of creation through

generation to generation, into eternity. God's divine love story, played out in the words of scripture and in the continued story of the Church. A story that included you before you were born, and will include you and me until the day that we die, and beyond. God's love is inseparable, unable to be defeated or turned away. It is unending, and we are God's beloved.

The funny thing about Jacob's story is that it is very one sided. We only hear the story from his perspective. But every true love story has two voices. What was Rachel's side of the story? Did she also have love for Jacob? Did she notice him at the well in the same way that he noticed her? How did those first seven years seem to Rachel, did they move like molasses or speed by like a few days?

To add to that, Paul's letter also is missing something as well. As eloquently as he tells of God's divine love, there is no mention of the other half of the story. Our half. When did we first notice God and God's love? When did we first feel that we might love God in return?

Jesus was sent into the world that we might fully understand and feel God's love, human to human. Love that healed, love that cared, love that fought for the helpless and weak, love that endured hate and pain and suffering. Love that was willing to die that the object of that love might live. And Jesus also shared how we might best respond to this amazing love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

The best way that we have been given to show our love has been to share it with our neighbors. To care for the weak and helpless. To welcome the stranger as friend. To turn the cheek and believe in the best in others. We have a role in the greatest love story of all time, and beyond time. How will we respond to God's unending love? That story is still being written.