

The Accidental Bigamist

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 25, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 29:15-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Three weeks ago I preached a sermon on the story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. At that time, I tried to tell some of what the Bible and the church teaches about sex and marriage. My sermon had four points:

- Rule One: It's best if both marriage partners share the same faith.
- Rule Two: It's best if a couple has never had sexual intercourse before marriage with one another or with anyone else.
- Rule Three: Marriage between members of the people of God is not merely for self fulfillment but for building God's promised new society.
- Rule Four: Be supportive of your children's marriages.

I hadn't intended to preach so soon about the matter of sex and marriage. But one of the challenges of lectionary preaching is that the preacher let's the church, in its wisdom, limit what passages of the Bible to preach. Therefore, I was faced with another Old Testament story which, upon study, prayer and reflection, demanded that I address the subject of marriage again.

My sermon, this morning, has three points:

1. Jacob was willing to wait.
2. Jacob was eager to consummate.
3. Jacob encountered a dilemma to complicate matters.

1. Jacob was willing to wait. Jacob fell head over heels in love when he first saw Rachel, the younger of Laban's two daughters, who is described as "shapely and beautiful." He offered to work for Laban seven years in return for the privilege of marrying Rachel. Jacob loved Rachel so much that he was willing to wait. At the end of seven years he still loved Rachel and wanted her for his wife.

Like Jacob, it's best for us to wait and not rush into marriage the first time we feel strong romantic love for someone. Not only is it best to wait until marriage to have sex, it's better for young people to wait until you're older to get married. People who wait have a better success rate in marriage than those who rush into marriage.

I once heard Earl Nightingale say that only one in fifty marriages involving airline hostesses ends in divorce, while the national average is something like one in four. Among women college graduates, only one marriage in seventy ends in divorce, and in the case of women holding degrees in Home Economics, only one marriage in about 300 ends in divorce, whereas, one out of three teen-age marriages ends in divorce.

Puzzled by these statistics, Nightingale asked his wife how she interpreted them. She offered this explanation: "The marriages of airline hostesses and college girls tend to be successful, not because they're hostesses or college graduates, but because these women are usually a little older, have been around a good deal more, and know what they want in a husband. They're not as apt to grab the first man who comes along. They know that marriage should be a lifetime proposition and they take their good, sweet time in selecting someone for so important a contract."

Nightingale goes on to say, "Of course there's more to it than that: These women also have learned how to get along with other people, how to give as well as take; how to be tactful; how to spot a dangerous situation before it arrives and

side-step it. And they most certainly have learned how to work, and work hard for their achievements.”

He ended the program with this advice to both men and women. “Wait until you’re old enough to know what you want, and who you want, to spend the rest of your life with.”

Jacob knew what he wanted. He knew who he wanted. Those seven years tested his love and proved it to be genuine. At the end of those years he still loved Rachel. Jacob was willing to wait. People who wait until they’re married before they have sexual relationships and who wait until they’re older before they get married have a better chance of having a happy marriage.

2. But, if Jacob was willing to wait, he was also eager to consummate his marriage with Rachel. So, after seven years, Jacob says to Laban, “Give me my wife so that we may sleep together.” Jacob was eager to consummate his marriage.

Some people blame the Christian church for having a negative view of sex. The church, ministers and parents often emphasize the prohibitions. But the Bible has a very positive view of sex. We see this in opening chapters of Genesis. “God created humankind in God’s own image, in the image of God, God created humankind; male and female God created them” (Gen. 1:17).

We also see this positive view of sex in The Song of Solomon, a poem in which a young man and woman express longing to consummate their love. ~~Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 20th century, said that The Song of Solomon was an~~

~~extended, poetic, commentary on Genesis~~

O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
your anointing oils are fragrant...
Draw me after you, let us make haste...

The Bible talks about sex within marriage as something that should be sensual without being licentious, passionate without being promiscuous, love without lust (Smedes). Often love within marriage isn't this way. Human sin and self-will distort even the most beautiful of relationships. In many ways we fall short of what Scripture teaches.

But marriage isn't simply a license to have sex. Lewis Smedes writes that the relationship between marriage and sex isn't like the relationship between a corral and lusty bull. Think about that! Marriage isn't a negative institution that's meant to limit our happiness and to keep our sexual impulses from becoming roaming lusts. Marriage isn't a God-given lid to clamp down on an impulse that, left free to roam, could reduce life to chaos. Marriage isn't just for the control of sex; it is for the liberation and fulfillment of sex. When the Bible and the church say to wait until marriage, it's not because of a negative view of sex.

God invented sex. God should know how it can best be celebrated. God loves us. God came to us in Christ and died for us to redeem us. God wants what's best for us. God's word teaches that sex can be wonderful within marriage, but outside marriage, it's an offense to God.

3. So Jacob was willing to wait and he was eager to consummate his marriage but he encountered a dilemma to complicate matters. The story of what happened

reminds me of a Blondie cartoon I once read. Blondie and Dagwood are sitting in easy chairs in their living room. Blondie says, "Peggy Krookas is getting married in a backyard ceremony this weekend." Dagwood responds, "When did the groom pop the question?" Blondie says, "Oh, he doesn't know about it yet. He thinks he's coming to a barbecue."

Well, Jacob, like that unwitting groom, was in for a real surprise. When Jacob asked for Rachel, Laban quickly planned a big wedding. He invited all his friends. He prepared a wedding feast that would involve a full week of eating, drinking, laughter and story telling according to the custom of the day. On the first night, Laban led his veiled daughter to Jacob, who took her to his tent to consummate the marriage. It was dark in the tent and hard to see. Jacob may also have drunk himself silly so that he was unable to distinguish who he was sleeping with. And apparently they didn't talk much that night or Jacob might have noticed a different voice than Rachel's. For whatever reasons Jacob didn't discover until the next morning that the woman with whom he had spent the night wasn't Rachel, but her older sister, Leah.

What a joker that Laban was! Jacob, however, failed to see the humor in Laban's prank. He angrily confronted Laban. Laban explained, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. We have a custom in our country whereby the oldest daughter is always married first. Now, don't make a scene and embarrass yourself before all my friends who've witnessed your marriage to Leah. Wait until the end of the week and you can have Rachel in return for working seven more years for me."

So Jacob encountered a dilemma to complicate matters. He loved Rachel but he was married to Leah. Does he just leave Leah or throw her out of his tent? That's what John Calvin thought he should have done. Calvin said, "he might have dismissed Leah, because she had not been his lawful wife: because the mutual consent of the man and the woman... constitutes marriage." Or does he stay with Leah and resign himself to having lost Rachel forever? It seems to be a no win situation. He decided to remain married to both. That wouldn't be allowed today in the United States but it was allowed in the culture of Jacob's day. So Jacob became an accidental bigamist. He hadn't intended it this way, but that's what happened.

I wish the Bible didn't have stories like this in to complicate my theology. The opening chapters of Genesis teach that God's intention for marriage is a life long relationship between one man and one woman. "A man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). In the New Testament, Jesus added, "So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

It's clear that the Bible, from beginning to end, holds this as the ideal. But then the Bible complicates matters by telling us stories of patriarchs who practiced polygamy. These aren't examples for us to imitate. "How dangerous it is", John Calvin writes, "to imitate the fathers while we neglect the law of the Lord."

I believe we find these complicating stories in the Bible to remind us that

we're not now as God created us to be. We're fallen and sinful creatures who fall short of God's glory and of God's intentions and are in need of God's grace that is offered to us in Jesus Christ. God intended marriage to be a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. God intended sexual relationships to be celebrated and enjoyed only within that relationship. But sin entered the world complicating God's good creation and all God's good intentions. The Bible contains these stories to let us sinners know that God uses sinful men and women caught up in sexual confusion and complications of the day. The Bible tells these stories, also, to show us how much we all need a Saviour. Even the heroes of our faith, like Jacob, needed a Saviour. And it was through one of the descendants of Jacob and Leah that the Saviour, Christ, finally came.

As God forgave and used Jacob, Rachel and Leah, God also offers to all of us grace and forgiveness when we fail and mess up. We're a pilgrim people on our way. None of us has arrived. Let us continue to live and love in a close knit community that will be supportive to all people, single, divorced, and married, young and old.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you see your children growing up in an uncertain, confusing and complicated world. Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing selfish goals. Help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as an opportunity for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you and to keep alive their joy in your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.