

The Accidental Bigamist

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on July 25, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 29:15-28.

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

As a child I remember an advertisement for a certain brand of watch which had the phrase, "It takes a licking but keeps on ticking." This advertisement might be a good way to describe the American family. The family has undergone significant, some would say radical, change over the millennia. This has been especially so in ^{our} ~~my~~ life time. The family is also a metaphor for the church. In fact, look at your bulletin cover. Our church claims to be a family of Christians ~~who follow Jesus Christ~~. Whether you're single or married or divorced ^{our church can be} ~~you have a~~ ^{your} family. ^{Through faith in Christ.} Whether you've given birth or fathered children - we all make promises to take on parental responsibilities when a child is baptized. Our Christian family welcomes all who trust in Jesus: ~~single, married, divorced.~~

The Bible talks a lot about families. The book of Genesis describes one deeply disturbed family after another. Adam and Eve have a son who murders his brother. Abraham, the father of the faithful, is willing to let Pharaoh sleep with his wife in order to escape death. Sarah gives her servant Hagar to Abraham and then abuses the servant for doing exactly what Sarah had asked Hagar to do - give Abraham a son. And today we hear about Jacob, Leah and ^{Rachel} Rebecca. Let's take a closer look. Marriage is the topic of my sermon this morning. I have three points to make: Jacob was willing to wait. He was eager to consummate. He encountered a complicating dilemma.

First Jacob was willing to wait. Jacob fell head over heels in love with Rachel, the younger of Laban's two daughters. She was "lovely in form and beautiful." Jacob offered to work seven years for Laban in return for the hand of Rachel. Jacob loved Rachel so much that he was willing to wait. At the end of seven years he still loved Rachel. ^{in 12 yrs, nephews} Tell your children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren that it's best to wait and not rush into marriage. Not only is it best to wait until marriage to have sex, it's better for young people to wait until they're older to get married. People who wait have a better success rate in marriage.

Earl Nightingale once said 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 of three teen-age marriages ends in divorce. Nightingale asked his wife how she interpreted these statistics. 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, 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 involves a lifetime commitment and take their time in selecting someone for so important a relationship. 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 sidestep it. And they have learned how to work, and work hard for their achievements. He ended the program saying, "Wait until you're old enough to know what you want, and who you want to spend the rest of your life with."

Jacob know 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. Tell your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren that 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. Jacob was willing to wait.

Second, Jacob was also eager to consummate his marriage with Rachel. 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 claim that the church has a negative attitude about sex. The church often emphasizes the prohibitions: no sex outside of marriage. But the Bible has a very positive view of sex. The opening chapter of Genesis says, "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). In the Song of Solomon we read the poem of a lover. "O that you

would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine." Lewis Smedes writes that the Bible talks about sex within marriage as something that should be sensual without being licentious, passionate without being promiscuous, love without lust. But marriage isn't simply a license to have sex. Smedes writes that sexual relationships within marriage guarantee far greater freedom from anxiety, guilt, disease, and unwanted pregnancies. God isn't a killjoy. God invented sex. God knows how it can best be celebrated. God loves us. God came to us in Christ and died for us. God wants the best for us. Tell that to your children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. It's a good Sunday dinner topic of conversation. Jacob was eager to consummate, but only after marriage.

Third, Jacob encountered a complicating dilemma. The story reminds me of a Blondie cartoon. Blondie and Dagwood are sitting 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 feast that involved a full week of eating, drinking, laughter and story telling. 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 probably had too much to drink. And the two probably didn't talk much. The next morning Jacob wakes and discovers, not Rachel, but Leah.

Laban explained, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. We have a custom in our country that requires the oldest girl to get married first. If you really want Rachel you have to work for me another seven years." What a joker that Laban was! So Jacob encountered a complicating dilemma. He loved Rachel but he was married to Leah. What do you do? I'll tell you what I do when someone comes to me with that kind of dilemma. I say, "You made a commitment to be a loving and faithful husband in plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health, as long as you live." But Jacob does something shocking to our sensibilities. He doesn't throw out Leah,

like Abraham threw out Hagar. He takes Rachel as a second wife. He becomes an accidental bigamist.

I sometimes wish the Bible didn't have stories like this. They really confuse people. They confuse me and throw a monkey wrench into my theology. But I'm really glad that the Bible tells things the way they really are. It's clear that the Bible teaches 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." In the New Testament, Jesus added, "They are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder." But the Bible complicates matters by telling stories of patriarchs who all mixed up in the sexual anarchy of their day. These stories aren't for us to imitate. Bigamy is out for Christians. But these stories remind us that God's people have never really lived up to God's ideal. We're fallen and sinful people who fall short of God's glory and of God's intentions. We need God's grace offered in Jesus Christ. God intended marriage to be a lifelong commitment. God intended sexual relationships to be celebrated 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 know that God can use sinful men and women caught up in the sexual confusion of our day - just as he used Jacob and Leah and Rachel. The Bible tells us these stories so that we'll examine our own lives. All of us have sinned, if not in deed, in thought and word. We all need God's forgiving grace and power from the Holy Spirit. We are God's family. And as God's family we contain all sorts of people: single, married, divorced, remarried, young and old - God in Christ welcomes all. Whosoever will may come to be used by God, and to begin a life long program of rehabilitation and healing in Christ.

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