

“I DO!”

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Texts: Genesis 29:15-30 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

Every minister has a wedding story. A young ring bearer refused to walk down this aisle until his grandfather (the father of the bride) offered him five dollars; he still wouldn't budge until the grandfather forked over the cash. A groom was so nervous that he began to repeat the bride's vows. At the wedding of one of my childhood friends the minister spoke of how carefully the couple had prepared everything for their guests; a few hours before the service we discovered that the wedding soup the couple had made for the reception was spoiled (they failed to cook the meatballs before adding them to the soup) and the soup would have poisoned everyone there; meanwhile the couple's wedding cake lay strewn across the church sidewalk where the deliveryman slipped on a patch of ice. YouTube has a clip in which the priest marrying an older couple says, "Now how about a kiss?" And the bride kissed the priest! Every minister has a wedding story or two or three. Yet, none are better than Jacob's wedding story.

In some parts of the world marriages are arranged; people do not marry for love. Such marriages lie at the intersection of economic, political, and familial interests. Princesses are married off to the sons of kings and queens to secure alliances. Daughters are promised to business partners to secure financial empires. It may be a great deal for the business or royal family, but it is not always such a great deal for the prince or princess who is married off to a toad! Such arranged marriages have a long, history. Marriage for love has been a romantic ideal – but not always a reality.

Jacob's wedding story is a mixture of love and economics. It is a straightforward deal – work seven years and in return Jacob can marry his uncle Laban's daughter, Rachel. Those are the economics of the deal – a wife in return for services rendered. But Jacob loves Rachel, and because he does it seems to him a good deal, and the seven years fly by. He willingly gives seven years of his life in return for the woman he loves. (I won't ask

how many of you would make the same deal for your spouse.) At the end of seven years, Jacob demands his wife, and Laban complies by throwing a wedding feast with food, wine, dancing, wine, friends, and wine. Jacob and his veiled bride say their “I dos!” and enter the wedding tent to consummate the marriage. All has gone well; the seven years’ labor has been rewarded and Jacob is happy – until in the morning he rolls over and finds on the pillow beside him, out from under the veil, not his beloved Rachel, but her older sister Leah. The text says it with great simplicity – “When morning came, it was Leah.” Surprise!

Jacob the deceiver has been deceived. He who stole his brother’s blessing by deceiving his own father is himself deceived by his wily uncle. It seems to run in the family! Laban offers a lame excuse about the elder daughter marrying ahead of the younger, but he offers no apology for the deception or breach of contract. Jacob has married Leah – it is official and cannot be undone. Yet, Laban knows Jacob loves Rachel and so he offers a new deal – fulfill the marital obligations to Leah for a week, then marry Rachel provided only that Jacob commits to work seven more years. Jacob will have two wives, including the one he wants, and Laban will have seven more years of Jacob’s guaranteed services. You might think Jacob would hesitate to strike such a deal, given his uncle’s deception, but he agrees, for his love for Rachel is so great and he knows Laban has no more daughters to unload. So, he marries Rachel and works seven more years.

It is hard to tell whether this story is more about deception or love. With Jacob’s history, deception comes quickly to mind, but the deception only delays Jacob’s marriage to Rachel. It will not derail it. So great is Jacob’s love, that he willingly works seven years for her and then seven yet again. It is love that is finally rewarded when Jacob weds Rachel, and this time when morning comes, it is Rachel! The sisters are now his wives. But, says the text, Jacob loved Rachel more. It brings to mind the epitaph on an old tombstone:

Here I lie beside my two wives, Lilley and Tilley.

I loved them both but let me tilt towards Tilley.¹

Jacob loved them both; but he tilted toward Rachel.

So ends the wedding story and so begins the story of the twelve tribes of Israel. From Leah, Rachel, and their maids come the twelve sons who will form the tribes of Israel for centuries to come – a tribe for each son. Because Jacob loves Rachel more, he will favor her sons, Joseph and Benjamin, with some dire consequences for the sons. Yet, the amazing thing is that from such a dysfunctional family God could shape a people and perpetuate a promise first made to Abraham – *I will be your God and you, as dysfunctional and deceiving as you may be, will be my people*. God has kept that promise across the ages. Despite our dysfunction as families, churches, and individuals, God remains faithful. God doesn't give up on us. God perseveres. "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,*" writes Paul. God didn't wait for us to get our lives together and then send Jesus to us. God came to us in our dysfunctional brokenness and redeemed us when one might well wonder whether we were worth redeeming at all.

Ireland's Waterford crystal is famous the world over because each glass is perfect; no seconds are allowed. If a mistake is made at any point in the process, the glass is broken and discarded.² There is no place for anything less than perfect glass. Had God followed that policy, we would have been discarded long ago, but instead God takes us, with our flaws and imperfections, and gently remolds and reshapes us into something useful. Christ mends the flaws; Christ makes us whole. As amazing as Jacob's story is with his example of faithful love, the story of God's faithfulness to us is even more amazing!

Scripture describes that faithfulness in terms of God's memory – God remembers us. Instead of being cast off and forgotten, we are remembered. God remembers who we are, how we came to be, and how much God loves us. Even when we forget God, God remembers.

We may forget that God made us and dare to think we are self-made,
but God remembers us.

We may forget God's gracious promises, and despair at the
challenges that lie ahead, but God remembers us.

We may forget God's commandments, and do what is pleasing in our
own selfish eyes, but God remembers us.

We may forget God, but never does God forget us!

When prayers have been too long silent on our lips or too long absent from our hearts, and we turn to God in a moment of desperation, saying: “Lord!” God says, “I’ve been waiting for you. I know your name and your heart, and though you have been silent these many weeks or months or years, still I remember you.” Do not think God has forgotten you, even if you have forgotten God. *“Even now says the Lord, return to me with all your heart.” (Joel 2:12) Return to me for I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love. Remember me, for I remember you. With every bite of bread, with every sip from the cup at this table, remember me. With the dawn of each new day, remember me – for I have remembered you.*

God remembered Leah, the instrument of the deception and mother of six tribes of Israel. God remembered Rachel, the bait for Laban’s trap and the mother of Benjamin and Joseph, ancestor of King David and of Jesus. God remembered and blessed these women despite the deceptions of their father. God remembered Jacob and blessed him to the ends of the earth. If God could remember them, might God not remember you and me as well?

When I speak with a couple about their wedding service, I ask them to remember two things in their planning – their love for each other (that is usually easy) and their love for God (which is sometimes a greater challenge on their wedding day). Amid the flowers and the dresses, the relatives and the rings, the friends and the frenzy, God may be forgotten. Yet, every wedding should hold together these two things – love for each other and love for God. Amid the kids and careers, the house and the hectic pace of life together across the years, God may be forgotten. Yet, every marriage should hold together these two things – love for each other and love for God. Amid the stuff of living in the 21st century – heat waves and fires and intense storms driven by climate change, artificial intelligence moving faster than our ethics can keep up, political polarization that resembles tribal warfare, all the claims upon our time and lures for our dollars, God may be forgotten. Yet, every life, says Jesus, should hold together these two things – love for one another and love for God. That is the Great Commandment!

Today there are many poor substitutes for love of God and love of one another.

Materialism offers things and more things;
hedonism offers any profane pleasure you want to satisfy;
narcissism makes **you** the object of your love;
nationalism offers the country wrapped in a flag to be worshiped.
The isms go on and on, but each makes the same claim: to be your first love
and to somehow soothe your soul. In so doing they separate us from God
and from one another.

Faithfulness demands that we love God and one another with love
that is honest and true, patient and kind – love that bears, believes, hopes,
and endures all things – and by *all things*, I think Paul means **all things**! In
marriage, in friendships, in life, we are called to be faithful and love one
another – faithful to our spouses and families and friends and neighbors all.
Faithfulness demands that we resist the temptation to forget God and
make for ourselves other gods. For, in faithfulness God has remembered us
and offered to us God's own self in Jesus Christ. God does indeed
remember us - always. How then will you remember God? Amen

¹ *Holy Wit*, compiled by James A. Simpson, Gordon Wright Publishing: Edinburgh, 1986, p.59

² Bill O'Brien, "Living by the Word: Clay Pots", *Christian Century*, June 28, 2005, p.21