

SERMON TITLE: "Forgiveness: Wrestling with Shame"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 29:30 – 30:8
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 10, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Since the last Sunday of December, we've been focusing our attention on the topic of forgiveness. As Christians, we know we aren't supposed to harbor any grudges or ill will. We're supposed to practice mercy. We're supposed to make peace and love other people. We're supposed to let bygones be bygones. We're supposed to forgive and forget, so we can let go of sins and embrace a grace-filled future. Yes, yes, yes. All that's an especially good idea as we move into a new year, filled with new hopes and new opportunities.

But, as most of us know all too well, forgiveness doesn't always come as easily as we'd like. Life presents many challenges and hindrances to this Christian ideal. Sometimes we need help to accomplish what we're supposed to do. That's why, each week, we're looking at a biblical story and considering what help it might give us in regard to forgiveness. For example, last week, we read the story of Joseph, Mary, and young Jesus fleeing into Egypt to get away from the wrath of King Herod. I made the case that, when we're dealing with danger, our first priority is to put some quick distance between us and the threat. After the danger is diminished, then we can work on forgiveness.

Of course, not every offensive situation is life threatening, and there are times when fight seems like a better option than flight. Today's scripture reading gives us a glimpse into the story of Leah and Rachel. Let's see what we can learn from those two sisters, who worked on their issues of forgiveness by wrestling with shame.

1—THE BIBLICAL STORY

We begin by reviewing the background of this story, which is full of shameful contention and forgiveness challenges. You may recall that the twin brothers Jacob and Esau were rivals for their father

Isaac's affections. Jacob tricked his elderly and blind father into blessing him instead of the firstborn Esau. Then Jacob fled the wrath of his brother and traveled quite a distance to live with his Uncle Laban.

Once there, Jacob fell in love with his Uncle Laban's younger daughter Rachel and asked permission to marry her. After making him wait and work seven long years, Uncle Laban said, "Yes," but then he played a terrible trick on Jacob. We don't know if it was because Jacob drank too much wine at the wedding feast, because the sisters looked a lot alike, or because Jacob had inherited his father's poor eyesight—but somehow, Jacob unknowingly spent his wedding night with the wrong woman. Only in the light of morning did Jacob realize that the woman in his bed was the older sister Leah instead of the younger sister Rachel. Uncle Laban excused his deception by saying it was customary in their country that the older sister had to be married first. Laban told Jacob that, after one week with Leah, Jacob could take Rachel as his second wife—if he would stay there and work for Laban seven more years. That may have solved Uncle Laban's problem of marrying off his daughters in proper order, but it created quite a troublesome situation for Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

Because Rachel was the one Jacob loved, Leah felt unloved. Leah knew her marriage was only an arranged formality. She knew it was due to cultural conventions, and not because of a heartfelt connection. Certainly there would have been shame for her father and for her if Laban had allowed Jacob to marry the younger Rachel and older Leah had remained unclaimed. The shame of broken social custom would have been horrible. But, living in this arranged, contract marriage, Leah's shame was difficult too. How do you keep up appearances, when you know that your husband loves someone else instead? How do you find happiness and fulfillment in your marriage when you know your husband's heart belongs to someone else?

Leah's shame was deep. In Genesis 29:31-35, we see that, besides "unloved," Leah felt "afflicted" and "hated." Even as she bore her husband four sons, Leah continued to worry that her husband was not "joined" to her in his heart. Leah was her father's firstborn daughter, and yet she lived with the constant shame of being her husband's second-place wife.

Of course, it wasn't only Leah who was suffering in shame. Her younger sister Rachel also felt the shame of their strange marital situation. Even though Rachel was the chosen wife, the loved wife, the wife for whom Jacob labored seven years and then seven more years, Genesis 30 tells us that Rachel had to live with the shame of being barren. In that ancient culture, a wife's duty was to bear children. In that patriarchal society, a woman's worth came through the work of raising a family. So, as Rachel watched her older sister provide four sons to Jacob, Rachel's lack of children became all the more apparent. Genesis 30:1 tells us that Rachel's great shame caused her to envy her sister and make unreasonable demands on her husband. Jacob's angry response, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" shows the stress that Rachel's shame was placing on the whole family.

As time went on, Rachel came up with a plan. She would give her maid-servant to her husband and produce children through her. That happened, and the maid Bilhah bore two sons. In Genesis 30:8, Rachel claimed those sons as her own victories, saying, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed."

If you read the verses that follow, however, you can see that this wrestling contest wasn't over; it continued between the two sisters. Employing her maid-servant Zilpah, Leah gained two more sons on her side of the family, and then Leah herself bore two more sons. If you're keeping score, it's now eight to two. And then finally, Rachel herself bore two sons for her husband. Eight to four. In verses 20-23, we hear the two sister-wives use words that describe the easing of their shame. Leah says, "God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honor me." And Rachel says, "God has taken away my reproach."

2—WRESTLING WITH SHAME

Do you hear how these two sisters were wrestling not so much with each other as with their own shame? Forgiveness issues are often like that. When we get in a twist with other people, often it

isn't even about what they did or what we did that needs to be forgiven. The reason why forgiveness can be so hard is that the conflicts, competition, jealousy, anger, denial of reality, and unreasonable demands are more likely caused by our and their underlying and persistent sense of shame. That deeply buried feeling of inadequacy, inability, insecurity, and unworthiness isn't an isolated action that can be confessed and forgiven. Yet that core feeling of low esteem can color and affect all that we think, say, and do.

So, if we find that we're having trouble with forgiveness, we may need to examine ourselves and the people with whom we're wrestling. Rather than get all bent out of shape over particular and often small offenses, we may need to determine if the real and amplifying problem might be shame. I know it's not any fun to examine ourselves that closely. Sometimes we've hidden away our shame so deeply for a reason. It's just too painful to think about how unloved or vulnerable we have felt. Shame can develop from trauma we've experienced as adults, as youth, or even as young children. It's hard to go back and dredge up that emotional memory, and we quite often just don't want to. But the truth is that—if we're having a lot of conflicts, if we're having trouble letting go and moving on with forgiveness—we might just have to peel back a few layers of our lives and consciously wrestle first with our own sense of shame.

Because that kind of deep soul-searching is scary business, many people find it helpful to work on these issues with the guidance of a professional therapist. In a safe and encouraging relationship with a well-trained and empathetic counselor, we are more able to get to the bottom of what's really eating on us and then find some kind of healing from that shame. Fortunately, even during this pandemic, a lot of psychotherapists are offering counseling sessions online, so we and they can stay safe as we work through our troubles. A good place to begin is to check out which counselors are covered by your health insurance plan. If the first therapist you meet isn't a good fit for you, then try another one to get the help you need.

There are other ways to heal our shame too. While the marital and child-bearing competition between Leah and Rachel seems bizarre to us in our culture today, for them it was an attempt to overcome their feelings of inadequacy. Today, we might choose to improve our self-confidence by going back to school to gain a new competency. We might overcome our vulnerability by getting a better job, earning more money, and getting out of debt. We might strengthen our self-esteem by exercising and losing weight. We might regain our sense of lovability in a new relationship or with some new friends. We might restore our respectability by accepting defeat with graceful flexibility. We might even follow Leah and Rachel's lead in praying to God for assistance. Forgiveness will come a lot easier, after we have first done our work of wrestling with shame.

CONCLUSION

I watch a lot of detective-lawyer type shows on TV. One of the common plot lines is when the crime is rape, and the victim is wrestling in her own mind about whether or not to testify at the trial. The victims of sexual assault are often ashamed of what happened to them, and they are afraid that they will feel even more shame if they speak about it in a public courtroom. So, it often falls upon the detectives and prosecuting attorneys to try to persuade the sexual assault victims that they will feel better once their perpetrator is locked up. If that argument doesn't work, then the law enforcers talk about the additional shame the victims will feel if they let the perpetrator go free to possibly commit the same crime again on someone else. In the best-case scenarios, the victim chooses to testify, the criminal is convicted, and the victory of justice goes a long way toward healing the victim's shame.

Like I said last week about dealing with danger, we get into a mixed up mess when we treat forgiveness like it's the first or most obvious thing we must do. Sometimes there's something else that has to come first. Before we arrive at the freedom and resiliency of forgiveness, we may well have to do some wrestling with shame.