

## Being in Relationship – Teresa Holden

Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Today's Scriptures describe different ways of being in relationship. Genesis tells about an ancient business transaction between Laban and Jacob that makes provisions for the most intimate of relationships between husbands and wives. Romans describes our relationship with the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Matthew, Jesus gives us a description of a big picture idea – our relationship to the Kingdom of God. If we wanted to categorize these relationships, we could say they form a progression starting with Genesis where people relate very primitively. In the relationships between Laban, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, transactions occur that leave two of the people, Leah and Rachel, completely voiceless. They can't protest; they have no recourse for what happens to them. In contrast, Paul describes in Romans a relationship with God that is intimate and mature and incredibly empowering to the Christian. Finally, in Matthew, Jesus uses a series of metaphors to describe how vast and precious the Kingdom of Heaven is. Our relationship to this Kingdom is so transcendent that we can't really get our heads around it, no matter how many metaphoric descriptions Jesus gives us, but He clearly wants us to understand our role in this Kingdom.

What can we learn from these three vastly different forms of relationships? Do they say anything, in particular, about our own condition in the world? I'm going to talk about them as being both descriptive and prescriptive – each of these types of relationships can describe our situation, and they can prescribe how we should be relating to others.

Let's start with the Genesis story. I remember hearing and reading this story as a child, and always feeling badly for Rachel for being cheated. She (not her sister, Leah) had been the one to win the affection of the handsome prince Jacob who had come to rescue a beautiful country girl from the plains of Haram. Now, as an adult, I realize that this story is presented to us only from the perspective of Jacob, so we really don't know how either Leah or Rachel felt about Jacob or about the actions of their father, Laban. In fact, in contrast to the fairy tale imaginings of this story that I had as a child, Leah and Rachel appear to be merely chattel in this passage.

Chattel is property that is bought, sold and traded. Hebrew scholars resist calling Jewish women chattel, who, like these two women had marriages arranged by their fathers that were based upon some sort of deal or trade. Scholars point out the fact that while this was a usual practice, these women did not continue to be traded, and these transactions often provided their families with property or security so that their lives would be more comfortable. So, perhaps they weren't really chattel, but nevertheless in this part of the Jacob story our narrator gives no regard to how these women felt about the deals their father and Jacob made. They had no say over the matter, and this is just accepted in the text. We don't know if these women thought

Jacob was kind of cute, or ugly, or gross, or old (he was reportedly 76 years old by this time). Nevertheless, in upcoming chapters, these women become involved in all sorts of shenanigans, presumably to gain greater status and power in their relationships with Jacob. They get their maidservants involved, and by the time it's all over, Jacob ends up with 12 sons and a daughter by four women. Rachel (whom, we are told, Jacob loved) is mother to only two of these sons, Joseph and Benjamin, who is the youngest of the whole group. Benjamin is distinctive because Rachel died giving birth to him.

Our lectionary reading for today only gives us the part of this story that reveals the trickery of Laban, the persistence of Jacob and the silence of Leah and Rachel. I am fascinated by the role these women of antiquity play in this story, and I want to explore what we can gain from their silence. What is it we can learn from their experience of subjugation?

The best person I know of to help us understand this is W. E. B. Du Bois. Even a PhD from Harvard couldn't keep Du Bois, who was African American, from experiencing the racism that was embedded within early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. In his 1903 book, *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois eloquently describes the experience of being black in America at that time, and in doing this he offers a powerful metaphor that is useful as we think about our Scriptures today. In his first chapter entitled, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois says people of color, through their subjugation are (in his words) "born with a veil and gifted with second sight." They possess what he calls a "double-consciousness" which he describes as "[a] sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Nevertheless, he refers to this second sight as a gift, because it allows one to perceive what others think, while at the same time possessing a sense of self and a knowledge of the richness of one's own culture, which is concealed to the outside world by the veil.

The metaphor of the veil can help us to understand more fully how people experience subjugation, and it helps to explain the silence of Leah and Rachel. These women were well aware that no one wanted to hear from them. So our Scripture readings start us with these two women who in silence had to submit to the intimate decisions made about them by the men in their lives. Their own desires and wishes are shrouded behind a metaphorical veil that doesn't allow us to even feel their emotions – anger, disappointment, relief – whatever those feelings were, we don't know.

Functioning in the world as a silent party is a powerless state. These were primitive times, and God seems to have been bringing this group of people along to fulfill his ultimate plan (which is to usher in the Kingdom of God), starting by working through the primitive culture that existed at the time. To some extent, this story is prescriptive. We no longer live in primitive times, and the message of the Bible is one that insists that we build the Kingdom of God by giving voice to the voiceless. We must both appreciate the protection that people receive from whatever their "veil," is, but also celebrate their humanity and the rich culture they enjoy behind their veils.

Still, our Scriptures also give hope to those who themselves feel voiceless. In Romans 8 we are invited to participate in a powerfully dynamic relationship with God that is available to us through God's grace and the power of His love. Our passage for today comes in the midst of this extraordinary treatise written to the church in Rome in which Paul outlines his theology. If he had been a PhD student, Romans would have been Paul's written exam, where one is instructed to coherently respond to a question by telling everything one knows about the topic. In the letter to the Romans, Paul wanted to lead the Roman Christians to understand how Judaism and the gospel of Christ are integrated. He did this by expounding on the fact of justification by faith, not the Jewish law, yet also by honoring the tradition and historic preeminence of the Hebrews.

In the midst of all of this theology, Paul pauses to describe the thoroughly comprehensive nature of God's love for us, and he transports his audience to a new understanding of God, His love and the relationship He wants to have with us. We learn here that even when we feel voiceless, when the circumstances in our lives are confusing, and we can't even formulate the right words to express what we hope for, the Holy Spirit knows and prays on our behalf, entering fully into our experience and identifying completely with how we feel.

Further, we are assured of the fact that God's love will sustain us through every aspect of life's journey, so that ultimately, "all things work together for good, to those who love God, and who are called according to His purpose." Paul provides a list of instances in which we can know God will help us, but the all-encompassing nature of the list lets us know that we can fill in our own circumstances and know that God and His love will help us to be "more than conquerors" in those situations – circumstances like disappointment, unemployment, loss, injury, illness – you can fill in the blank, and know that Jesus is praying for you, the Holy Spirit is guiding you and God's irresistible love is drawing you more deeply into your relationship with Him.

My children know that I call myself a "professional spectator." I've been cheering on children from the sidelines of some sort of athletic event for over fifteen years now. Of course, a professional spectator must conduct themselves well in the face of all sorts of adversity – whether that be defeat, horrible weather, excessive disappointment that one's athlete is experiencing, harassment that can come from the parents of opposing athletes, all sorts of thing. (I've mostly conducted myself well in all these situations.) Of course, the purpose of the Professional Spectator is simple: to support your athlete. Whenever I read this passage of Scripture (where Paul says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"), I picture God sitting in the stands (like my husband and I do at Hillsboro or standing in a driving rainstorm up at Lane Tech where DePaul runs), and I picture God cheering us on through all of the difficulties of life. Of course, unlike me, God can actually empower us to overcome all of the rotten circumstances life can throw at us. This suggests such an incredibly close, supportive relationship with God that is available to each of us individually. The prescription is for us to respond to God, to reach toward Him, as He reaches toward us.

While we are assured that God is a constant support on an individual level, He also has an overall objective that is bigger than any of us individually. According to Matthew, we each participate in this entity that transcends all of us called the “Kingdom of Heaven.” In contemporary America, we don’t really relate well to the concept of a “kingdom,” but I think Jesus really is talking here about a good, old-fashioned kingdom, and not anything like a “democratic-republic.” The Kingdom of Heaven according to Jesus is so big, much bigger than we would expect, and it is extremely precious, something that one wants to attain and protect vigilantly. We may have a hard time getting our heads around exactly what Jesus is talking about (for good reason, because it probably transcends all of our concepts of time, space and geography), but I think it is safe to say that a slice of the Kingdom of Heaven is present in the church to the extent that people are pure in their intentions to seek God there. Of course, a kingdom is a social place – people interact there; they are in relationships with one another, and that is part of what God calls us to do as Christians: to manifest God’s love in the world through the Church, and through our relationships in our everyday lives. Thus, our participation in the Church and all other ways that we exhibit the Love of God, I believe, expand the Kingdom of Heaven. This then is the prescription we find in Matthew 13: to love God and to work toward His goals by living lives true to his aims. As we do this, we will find that God will bring us into relationship with others who are either knowledgably in his Kingdom, or those He wants to bring on in, and thus, we will be a part of His transcendent, macro-purpose for the world.