

## Unattractive Leah Genesis 29: 16-35

I was having originally some difficulty coming up with a title for my sermon. I titled the first draft 'Ugly Leah,' but, I decided against it. To me and to many, 'ugly' is simply an ugly word. And we are not sure about Leah's appearance. She is called 'weak eyed' in scripture. We only know she was contrasted to her beautiful sister Rachel. The Hebrew word translated 'weak-eyed' '*rak*,' means 'weak' or 'dull.' So a girl who is called 'dull-eyed' is probably not accepting that as much of a complement. As I was contemplating my title, I did think of the television show that just got cancelled called "Ugly Betty." The plot consists of the main character, Betty Suarez, a very plain girl lacking fashion sense who is thrust into a different world when she lands a position with a major, trendy high fashion magazine. Some of her co-workers endeavor to constantly humiliate her because of her lackluster appearance. However, through persistence, and a loyal spirit, she gains friends in the company and is a key instrument in moving the magazine and certain co-workers forward. Even the Leah's and the Betty's of the world can make a big difference. But in the end I settled on my present title, because obviously Leah did not measure up to the external attributes of sister Rachael. But as we will see, despite setbacks and unfulfilled hopes, she kept her faith in God. Leah serves as an example of one who remains faithful even when the chips are down.

As I get older, I am becoming more inspired by those who hold on to their faith even when times get tough or prayers are unanswered. It can be easy to serve God when one is on the mountaintop, when everything is going well. But what inspires me is the one who obeys, believes and serves while walking and existing in the valleys and pits of life...when the medical report is not good...when the job is lost...or is filled by another...when love is rejected...when a tragedy occurs, as one celebrates a deliverance from a bad accident but another has suffered the consequences. As Ted beautifully sang, should the harvest never come, I still will praise thee. These people who remain faithful in the face of difficulty inspire me. This is why on Mother's Day; Leah, a plain, unfulfilled wife and mom, inspires my faith.

I think of two other people victimized by their appearance who inspired me as well. I think of Joseph Merrick, the 'Elephant Man' who because of his horrible appearance was abused and mistreated by many in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and England. Because of a kindly physician, Frederick Treves, Joseph is taking care of and even becomes sort of a celebrity because of his humility, intelligence and his faith. He still longs for things he knows he may never experience. At one point he asks to go to a hospital for the blind so that he might perhaps earn the love of a woman who will not be able to see his appearance. He ended most of his letters with this poem from Isaac Watts

Tis true my form is something odd,  
But blaming me is blaming God.  
Could I create myself anew,  
I would not fail in pleasing you.  
If I could reach from pole to pole,

Or grasp the ocean with a span,  
I would be measured by the soul,  
The mind's the standard of the man."

I love the end of the movie when he dies while earlier reading from the Book of Common Prayer. His faith remained strong despite of many others' repugnance.

I think of Sara, my sophomore year at UNC. I noticed her in the Granville cafeteria, eating by herself. She had some sort of disease or syndrome that had led to a disfigured facial appearance. She was difficult to look at, but I couldn't help but wonder with sadness at times if she ever had any social life at all in high school. Kids can be very cruel. Was she accepted by some growing up, or was she scorned and ridiculed because of her appearance. I knew she had to be intelligent. She was at Carolina. But what else had she enjoyed in life. One thing she had going for her were her parents, who would come eat with her occasionally in the cafeteria. I remember praying for her, and with difficulty wondering did I have any responsibility making her life better. I was a small group leader in Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, and in our first meeting there was Sara. She had been invited by my saintly co-leader Sharon Merritt. I felt joy, and yes, some fear at the same time. What I learned was that despite all the things Sara obviously missed out on, she had a heart that loved the Lord. I still remember her favorite chorus, called "Lord of the Dance," words put to the tune of that old Shaker hymn *Simple Gifts* made famous by conductor Aaron Copeland. She would ask for that song every meeting. Sara I think moved to another dorm the next year and I lost contact. About five years ago I ordered the complete student directory from 1970- 2000 and I saw that Sara had died at some point. Her faith has always inspired me and I look forward to seeing her in heaven.

We don't know Leah's appearance, but we know she did not have Rachael's beauty and charm. We do know she was able to celebrate God's goodness and provision even though never receiving the true love of her husband.

So let's briefly review her story. Jacob, with mother Rebecca's meddling, has stolen Esau's birthright and blessing. Most of us remember that story. Fearing for her son's life, and also wanting Jacob to marry a wife of mom's approval, Jacob is sent to Mesopotamia, back to his ancestral homeland, to look for a wife while Esau's anger settles down. Jacob eventually comes to a field, where large flocks of sheep have gathered. In the field was a large well, with a huge stone covering it. Jacob makes conversation with the shepherders. He discovers they are from the home country, and they know Uncle Laban, Rebecca's brother. They acknowledge to Jacob his uncle's wellbeing, and then remark that daughter and shepherdess Rachael is on her way to the well. Jacob is hit by the lightning bolt of love, as he removes the stone for watering, then goes to Rachael and kisses her while bearing tears of joy. Uncle Laban is thrilled to see his nephew, and Jacob stays for a month, helping Laban take care of his flocks. Laban then asks Jacob, 'I can't have you serve me for nothing, name your wages. Jacob, overcome by love, states, I will serve you seven years for daughter Rachael. In verse 20 it is noted that the seven years seem only for a few days because of Jacob's

love for Rachael. But at the wedding feast, one of the biggest wedding night 'switcheroos' in history takes place. This proves you should never party and celebrate too much on the wedding night. Because of too much wine, and the fact that the woman went in covered up in the wedding chamber, Jacob, the deceiver is deceived himself. The Hebrew in verse 25 is emphatic. So it came about in the morning that... behold, it was Leah! You got to be kidding me, its Leah! Oh no, not dull eyed Leah! Jacob is furious and incensed. Laban offers an explanation that it is customary to give the older daughter first, that he will have to work another seven years for Rachael.

I have often wondered about the reasons and reactions of Jacob, Laban and Leah. We certainly understand Jacob's feelings of consternation, but what about Laban? Was it simply a cynical plot to obtain more children to work the fields and flocks. Sometimes you don't even have to pay family as much as other laborers. Children are good for business. Was this deception a business decision only? Was it a 'spiritual' decision? With not much concept of an afterlife at this time, was it a means through many children to extend the family name for generations? Maybe. But perhaps it was a father who had a special love for an older daughter, a daughter always picked last for camel soccer, a daughter never asked to go to any celebration; while beautiful Rachael was out and about, the talk of the camp, sister Leah was always at home in the tents with mom and dad. I would like to think there was a measure of compassion in Laban's decision, trying to give a left-out daughter one good thing in her life.

And what about Leah and her thoughts of the plan? Did she say, 'Dad, don't do this...if I can't have Jacob's love, I don't need to be his wife.' Was she enthusiastic about the plan? She might have thought, 'This might be my only chance to get a husband?' Or was it a combination of both? 'You know, I can prove myself to Jacob, I will earn his love. I can show him what kind of mate and partner I can be.'

Well, Leah gained a husband, but did not gain his love. Verse 30 states 'Jacob loved Rachael more than Leah, and in verse 31, we learn, "Now the Lord saw Leah was unloved..." actually the Hebrew word for unloved, 'san`e' means hated or despised. Leah was obviously a second class citizen in the household.

But Leah does not give up on Jacob's love. I am sure she has prayed to God for this request. "Lord, please help my husband love me." Many spouses, both husbands and wives, have lifted up this prayer many times through the years. This prayer may be on some of your lips today.

Leah suddenly finds an opportunity to earn Jacob's love. Beautiful Rachael is barren, and Leah is excited, because she is pregnant. She celebrates the birth of a son and she names him Rueben, because she notes, 'The Lord has seen my affliction, my 'unloveliness', my 'unlovedness,' surely my husband will love me now.' The name Reuben means 'Look...a son!' Look Jacob, I have given you a son, will you not love me now? It seems the answer is 'no.'

A second son is born....realizing that her situation has not changed, Leah names him Simeon, meaning 'hearing.' God has heard Leah's prayers, He knows her sad condition. He has not given her a husband's love, but He has given her another son.

But there is still hope for a husband's love! A third son is born...named 'Levi,' meaning 'attachment.' Leah exclaims, "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have born him three sons!" Sadly, this hoped for love continues to be withheld by Jacob. Her prayers for love have ended for now. She then has a fourth son, and she names him 'Judah,' meaning praise. Leah exclaims, 'This time,..... I will simply praise the Lord.'

The highest form of praise for God is when you do not receive your request, but you chose to praise, honor and obey Him anyway. Now Leah did receive four blessings, four sons, with more to come. She was buried in the cave of the patriarchs by Jacob, so she at least earned a husband's respect. But whether in sunshine or storms, good or bad, plenty or want, love or no love, prayers answered or not, Leah knew her responsibility was to praise, worship and honor the Lord.

There have been believers miraculously saved from harm, there have also been believers eaten by lions. There have been believers with much material wealth, there have been and are believers who have lost everything. There are believers who have enjoyed the wonderful love of spouse and children, and there are believers who have had no family love at all.

The words of Ted's offering of music come from the book of Habakkuk...the prophet writes, *'Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vine. Though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!* Habakkuk is writing about the coming Chaldean invasion that will strip the people and the land of Judah. Even in the turmoil and destruction of the land, God is still a God to be praised. He will triumph in the end. Even in our personal turmoil that can and does happen to the children of God, our God is a God to be praised. He, and we, will triumph in the end.

Why, because He is God....Why? because He guarantees that even in the darkest time His presence will never leave us...Why? because in Christ we have an eternity of bliss and purpose awaiting us. Why?...because in our suffering and deprivation we often can make the most difference for God's Kingdom. When everything is stripped away, it's just you, and I, and God.

In Phillip Yancey's book on prayer we just completed, Philip tells of a visit to a leprosy hospital in Nepal. He writes, 'As I was walking in the courtyard, I saw one of the ugliest human beings I have ever seen. This lady had deformed stumps where there use to be feet. Her hands were covered in bandages, and her face showed the ravages of that cruel disease of leprosy. Her nose had disappeared into the sinus cavity. **Her eyes covered in callus, let in no light as she was totally blind. Scars covered the**

**skin on her arms.** Phillip saw that she walked using her elbows pulling herself along like a wounded animal. He was ashamed to say his first thought was ‘She is a beggar, looking for a handout.’ Philip Yancey then says his wife has a much more holy reaction. She bends down to the woman and puts her arm around her. The old woman rests her head against her shoulders and starts singing a song in Nepali...’Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so...”

‘Dhanmaya is one of our most devoted Church members,’ says the physical therapist giving the tour. Most of the patients are Hindus, but she comes to chapel every time the door is open. She is a prayer warrior. She greets and welcomes every visitor to the hospital, and she no doubt heard us talking when we came in the door. Philip found out that Dhanyama died a few months later. He writes, ‘Whenever I feel polluted by the beauty-obsessed culture we live in, I pull out a photo I took of her and my wife. Out of that deformed, hollow shell of a body, the light of God’s presence shines out.

So I proclaim that God’s presence is indeed found in the Leahs, Joseph’s, Sara’s and Dhanyamas in the world. God’s presence is found in our weakness and our want. In our weakness, we find God’s strength, in our want, we find God’s provision, in our surrender, we find God’s purpose.

So, we can be thankful today that we do not have to earn God’s love. We can be thankful we still can bring all of our requests to Him. We can be thankful for the ‘no’s’, and the assurance He will never leave us even in the worst of times.

*’Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vine. Though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, **Yet,** I will rejoice in the God of my salvation!*