



# **When We're Not the First Choice**

**Genesis 29:15-30**

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*Laban said to Jacob, “Because you’re my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?”*

*Now Laban had two daughters, the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful.*

*Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I’ll serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”*

*Laban said, “It’s better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.”*

*So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.*

*Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.”*

*So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) When morning came, it was Leah!*

*And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you’ve done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?”*

*Laban said, “This isn’t done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we’ll give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”*

*Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah.*

The best stories in the Bible are the ones that parents don’t tell their children. The book of Genesis has some dull stories that portray Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, as a shining example of faith. Parents tell that kind of story.

The story of Jacob's two weddings is the kind of R-rated, embarrassing story that parents don't tell. When I read the scripture I tried not to blush. I thought about suggesting that you read the passage silently and then raise your hands when you are done. I could have had Erica read it as a kind of hazing for the new minister. God isn't mentioned in this story and may be glad to be left out of it.

While parents tell carefully edited stories, someone like a great aunt is more likely to enjoy hanging out the dirty laundry for everyone to see. During my first semester at college my father suggested that I visit his great aunt who lived forty miles away.

Aunt Ruby was eighty years old. I didn't know her well. At first we had trouble finding anything to talk about, but then, just as I was trying to come up with an excuse to leave, she said, "I've got a photo album that you might enjoy."

My parents had told me about my great-great-grandfather who was a circuit-riding Methodist preacher. They failed to mention the great-great-grandfather who was a foreman on the railroad. He hired workers who spoke no English, so that he could pay them half of their salaries and keep the other half.

Aunt Ruby told me stories about my grandfather that I'm not sure my father has heard. I knew that grandpa was, at that point, married for the fourth time, but I hadn't really thought about why I had so many ex-grandmothers. Aunt Ruby gave me details, intimate details, details I didn't need to know.

Aunt Ruby showed me an old photograph of a family reunion. She went down the line giving commentary that would have shocked the writers of Genesis: "Your great-great-uncle was a good person when he was sober, but that wasn't often. My aunt slept with anything that wore pants—back then that limited her to half the population. My cousin, your sixth cousin, was quite a gossip, so I spent a lot of time with her."

Aunt Ruby must have loved the story of Rachel and Leah. This explicit account is important to those who first read the story, because they are descendants of Leah and Jacob. This is their great-great-grandparents' story.

Jacob is unthinking, cruel, and dishonest, but God blesses him anyway. God promises that Jacob will be the father of a great nation, even though Jacob isn't married and isn't getting any younger.

Then Jacob meets Rachel. Her father Laban is as big a con artist as Jacob, and Laban has an advantage—Jacob is madly in love with Rachel.

She's the kind of gorgeous woman with whom lots of men think they're in love. Jacob will pay any price, so Laban comes up with a stunningly excessive demand for a dowry. Without even arguing, Jacob agrees to work seven years for Rachel.  
Don't ever go into business with your family.

Laban conveniently omits a minor detail in his verbal contract with Jacob. He says something ambiguous like, "I guess it's better to give her to you than some other guy."

They shake hands. Laban forgets to tell Jacob that in his country the oldest daughter has to marry first. Jacob labors for seven sweaty years.

At the wedding, Jacob makes a sacred promise to the woman standing beside him who is covered by an extremely dark veil. Jacob has too much to drink at the reception. The wedding night passes. The morning sun shines on the plain face of Leah. Jacob is horrified.

The writers of Genesis are careful not to say that Leah is unattractive. They only report: "Leah's eyes were lovely." This is the ancient equivalent of "She has a great personality." The text is extravagant in its praise of Rachel—"graceful and beautiful."

Leah is the old maid, the second choice. Can you imagine how painful this is? On her first morning as a married woman, Leah's lovely eyes gaze into the petrified face of a disappointed

husband. How horrible would it be to have your new husband tell you that he wanted your little sister on the honeymoon?  
*(George Thompson said this in a sermon on this text.)*

Jacob promises Laban another seven years if he can have Rachel, too. The agreement is marry now, pay later. Weddings last a week, so as soon as the semi-celebration of Jacob and Leah's wedding ends, Jacob marries his true love. The storyteller is brutally honest: "Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah."

If there's a patron saint for those who have drawn the short end of the stick, it's Leah. Her wedding day is supposed to be the high point of her life, but by the end of the week, Jacob is in the arms of her little sister. Leah feels abandoned, because she has been.

After Elizabeth Taylor's last wedding, one journalist wrote, "Poor Elizabeth: always a bride, never a bridesmaid."

We don't usually pity the bride, but no one deserves more sympathy than Leah. She's a good person to think about when we're not the first choice. When we feel inferior, it's because in some ways we are inferior. Maybe we can't sing or dance or bake a decent cake or change a flat tire or people keep telling us we have lovely eyes or a great personality. None of us can do everything we would like to do. We can't do some things we need to do.

When something breaks around the house, most people try to fix it, but some of us know better. We understand that our chances of being electrocuted, knocked out, or sliced open are several times greater than our chances of repairing what's broken. We are all inferior in one way or another.

We feel inferior because people tell us we're inferior. Our friends, family, and strangers let us know that we're not all that we should be. A research group followed business executives for six weeks and recorded their communication. They found that 67% of the input they received was negative. Two-thirds of what they hear is a put down.

Commercials tell us that if we're not good-looking, smart, and rich, then there's something wrong with us. But most of us aren't going to be president or a movie star. We'll probably never have our own television show. There are always going to be people cuter, brighter, and more successful than we are. We're not who we wish we were.

We feel inferior because we have unrealistic goals. The university in a town where I was a minister invited Barbara Brown Taylor to preach. Then they invited churches to come as a group. In a city with several hundred churches, surely there would be a big crowd.

A group from my church ate dinner together and went. I was surprised at the small crowd. There may have been a hundred people. Why wouldn't ministers want their congregations there?

Barbara Brown Taylor is a wonderful preacher who tells stories that help us recognize the presence of God. But I began to understand why there weren't more churches present when after a magnificent sermon, a member of our church said, "Brett, wouldn't you love to hear that kind of preaching every Sunday?"

I said, "Yes. That'd be great."

Another said, "We just don't hear that kind of creativity in the pulpit."

I said, "No, I guess not."

"I've never heard preaching like that, have you, Brett?"

"Nope, not even close."

The tiny crowd suddenly made sense. Why would ministers want their congregations to compare them to one of the best preachers in the world? It's like selling Bruce Springsteen tickets to Barry Manilow.

If we compare ourselves to the people who are the best at what we do we'll focus on the ways we fall short, because we have been taught that the only thing that matters is being number one. We think we're supposed to be the best and brightest.

W.C. Fields put it, “No one ever remembers numero two-o.”

It’s either climb to the top of the heap or be dissatisfied that you’re not at the top.

Leah played the hand she was dealt, and she’s one of the great heroines of Israel. Her story is a subtle yet profound reminder of God’s grace. The writers of Genesis make it clear that God’s promise to bless Jacob would have been made null and void had it not been for Leah, Jacob’s second choice.

Sisters being married to the same man simultaneously isn’t recommended in the best of circumstances, and in this case it is in many ways a disaster. And yet, out of this Jerry Springer kind of mess, Leah has six sons and a daughter: including Reuben whose name means “the Lord has looked upon my affliction”; Simeon, “The Lord has heard that I am hated”; and Judah, “I will praise the Lord”—the honored name of Judaism comes from Leah’s offspring.

Jacob loved Rachel more, but then Rachel died young. They buried Rachel near Bethlehem in an unceremonious spot, and Jacob grew fonder of Leah throughout their long life together. They buried Leah near Jerusalem next to Jacob, with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah. Jews, Muslims, and Christians visit the place as a holy shrine. One of the descendants of Leah was Jesus, another patron saint of second choices.

Leah’s story is a word of hope to anyone:  
whose parents wish for a different child  
who’s the last one picked for basketball  
who didn’t get into your first choice for college or your safety school  
who gets a B on a paper on which you worked twice as hard as your roommate who gets an A  
who wants to be married but isn’t  
whose experience with match.com makes you wonder which answers you got wrong

who's married to someone who doesn't want to be  
who can't have a child and wants one  
whose child wishes for a different parent  
who thought that the interview went better than it apparently  
went  
who can't decide whether to throw away the rejection letters  
who doesn't get the promotion that's long overdue  
who gets turned down for partner by people you thought were  
your friends  
who needs but can't afford a third bedroom  
who's been on a hundred airplanes without ever flying first class  
who avoids looking in mirrors  
who hides the scale in the closet  
who's envious of the friend who has six hundred Facebook  
friends  
who isn't sure why you were unfriended  
who's gone to a reunion and wishes you hadn't.

This story is hope to all the second choices who keep trying. Our future is being shaped by God who sees beyond our limitations to our possibilities. We are indispensable to God, because we aren't defined by what we can't do, but by who we are. If we sit pouting in the corner, sulking because we aren't somebody else, then we haven't recognized who we are.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish thinker, wrestled with his limitations. He longed to accomplish greater things than he was doing. Then one day he realized what God would say to him when he died. God wouldn't say: Why weren't you Abraham? Why weren't you Moses? Why weren't you David? God would say: Why weren't you Martin Buber? Why aren't you who you are?

We don't need to give the world what we don't have to give. We need to see what's ours and share it. We are unique because God wants us to be unique. We don't have to be the best at everything we do. We don't have to be the best at anything we do.

We have to be who we're supposed to be. Be James. Be Katherine. Be John. Be Susan. Be Aaron. Be Kalia. Be Chris. Be Wendy. Be Amy. Be Carl. Be Vicki. Be Robert.  
Be the one God created you to be.

*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

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