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“Un-Settling”

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Phil. 3: 7, 10-21; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52; Genesis 29: 15-28

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Jacob, the heel-grabber, whose very name means “supplanter”,
wakes up on his honeymoon morning to the biggest surprise of his life.

In classic understatement, Genesis says it this way:

“When the morning came, there was Leah!”

It’s one of the saddest lines in Scripture, I think,

ranking high on the disappointment scale right up there
alongside Samuel’s line to Saul, “The Lord has rejected you
as King over Israel” (1 Samuel 15:29),

or alongside the two friend’s lament to the stranger

they meet on the road to Emmaus,

“We had hoped he (Jesus) was the one
to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21)

Six words of unbelievable disappointment:

“When morning came, there was Leah!”

Not that there is anything wrong with Leah, whose name means “cow-eyed”.

She is the eldest of Laban’s two daughters, of marriageable age,
probably with big beautiful brown eyes.

It's just that Jacob thought the night before
that he was marrying her sister, Rachel, the girl of his dreams .
Or at least that's what their father had led him to believe
for the last seven years.
But you never can be too sure what's behind the burka,
or behind the wedding veil, as the case may be,
when Laban's running the show.

In Laban, Jacob, the ultimate trickster, the supplanter,
meets his match and learns what it feels like to be scammed.
It will make his future reunion with his brother Esau that much sweeter,
having experienced for himself the sting of skulduggery.
The dirty rotten scoundrel has been duped,
and now he must re-up for another seven years of service to Uncle Laban,
in order to win the hand of the younger sister, too,
the one who's grave disappointment goes unmentioned in the text.
That's fourteen years of indentured servitude to secure the woman he loves.
But Scripture says that it only felt like a few days to Jacob,
so in love is he with Rachel.
Perhaps love and preference are hints of things to come.

A recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly* called "Marry Him!", by Lori Gottlieb,
addresses the Leah-like panic and desperation that often grips
single women in their late 30's and early 40's
when there is no promising prospect of marriage on the horizon.
With their biological clocks ticking, these women have dreamed of
finding true love, marriage, having children and living happily ever after.
But when it doesn't happen that way, they are faced with some difficult choices.
One alternative, which the author herself has embraced,
is to opt for motherhood without a man,

and there are several ways of doing that.

Another alternative, the author's better advice now with the wisdom of hindsight, is this: "settle".

She says, "Don't worry about passion or intense connection.

Don't nix a guy based on his annoying habit of yelling "Bravo!" in movie theaters.

Overlook his halitosis or abysmal sense of aesthetics.

Because if you want to have the infrastructure in place to have a family, settling is the way to go.

Based on my observations," she says, "settling will probably make you happier in the long run, since many of those who marry with great expectations become more disillusioned with each passing year....

Our culture tells us to keep our eyes on the prize

(while our mothers, who know better, tell us not to be so picky),

and the theme of holding out for true love permeates our collective mentality..... that there is supposed to be something romantic and even heroic about the search for true love....

But marrying Mr. Good Enough might be an equally viable option."

(Lori Gottlieb, "Marry Him!" *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 2008)

So, what I'm wondering is this: why doesn't Jacob just settle for Leah?

It would have been seven years easier.

And she would have made a good enough wife and mother, wouldn't she?

As it were, she bore him six sons,

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, and Issachar,

progenitors of six of the twelve tribes of Israel;

and her handmaid Zilpah bore him two more, Gad and Asher.

Remember God's promise, renewed with Jacob during his dream at Bethel?

God promises to give Jacob and his descendants the land

on which he is lying,

and to make his descendants

like the dust of the earth, spreading out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

Could not God's promise have been fulfilled with just one wife, and eight potential sons, or did it require the two wives, the twelve sons, and the elements of true love and preference?

If you've ever seen the movie, *The Princess Bride*, or read the book, you know that the beautiful Princess Buttercup would never have settled for Mr. Good Enough, Prince Humperdinck, the heir to the Florinese throne. She could have settled when she thought her true love, Westly, had been murdered by the Dread Pirate Roberts.

But she didn't; she couldn't.

She kept her eyes on the prize, true love, even when she thought the object of her affection to be dead.

And so it is with Jacob.

His frenetic fourteen years of courting and wooing are less about his manhood, and more about a manifestation of the divine blessing that will eventually result in the twelve tribes of Israel;

and about a new way of being favored in God's world that does not rely on any human social constructs, such as birth order. It seems that love and preference are harbingers of things to come.

And what I'm also wondering is this:

How do we know whether to settle for what God has given us, or whether to wait until God provides something better, or whether to press on for our ultimate heart's desire,

thinking this is also part of God's intention for us?

When life's layout disappoints us;

when jobs are underwhelming, when relationships fall flat,

when our dreams become thwarted,

when we feel trapped in a less than ideal situation,

how do we discern God's will for us?

Sometimes this discernment becomes very tricky.

For example, a friend of mine,

a young African American Christian Educator,

accepted a call to a church in Florida

soon after his graduation from seminary.

And as you know, a call to serve a church is very much like a marriage.

Things were fine at first blush, he recalls, but in the morning, there was Leah!

He said, almost from the beginning, the church lied to him

about the terms of call,

failed to pay him what they had agreed to provide,

and failed to supply him with the resources

that he needed to do his job.

He was miserable there, and ultimately left for another position

after just one year, not fourteen.

But he will tell you, he struggled with that call:

whether to remain there and settle for less than ideal conditions,

or to wait and hope and pray that things might change,

or to leave and pursue his heart's desire, his true love.

He quickly opted to pursue his heart's desire,

because his heart was strangely "unsettled" with either of the

other two options.

I think this issue of settling pertains to our relationship with the church as well.

I will venture to suggest that we often too easily "settle" as church

for mediocrity, for luke-warmness, for almost, for less-than-desired,
for Leah-like marriage,
when it comes to our commitment to the church.

For example, sometimes we settle for singing the same old songs,
when the Psalmist very clearly advocates
singing new songs unto the Lord.

But we are comfortable and familiar with the old songs,
and so we settle in our ways and sing the songs of the older sister,
leaving the younger sister to wonder if we love her, too;
if we'll ever include her songs in the mix,
and thereby welcome her into our fold.

And sometimes we settle for being a provincial body of believers
instead of being a global body of believers.

We are perfectly fine with being an homogenous tribe marked by similarity,
when we could be a much more interesting group of varied color,
class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, creed, and background.

We settle for being an eight-tribe body, when we could be a twelve-tribe body,
the body which God intends for us to be.

The supplanter, Jacob, did not settle for that.

He struggled to realize his future, to expand his progeny
in order to fulfill God's promise;
to make his descendants like the dust of the earth,
in order to effect and bless peoples of eastern ethnicities,
and southern sexualities, of western world-views and
of northern nomenclatures.

We should not be settling for anything less than that,
because God's promise for us to be like dust,
which is everywhere,

depends upon our willingness to think and be expansive and pervasive,
even when that feels frightening or painful to us.

And sometimes we settle for that old maxim: 20 percent of our people
doing 80 percent of the work,
in spite of the fact that we're all listed as ministers of the church.

We settle for people dropping in and out when it is convenient,
shrugging our shoulders when we can't make
meetings or attend worship or funerals of the great or small.

And we think that's okay, because after all, the church
is an institution made up of volunteers,
and volunteers are free to come and go at whim.

But is serving God a voluntary commitment,
or is it a calling that consumes our all?

I love the story told of the Desert Fathers,
and of a disciple who came to Abba Joseph, saying,
"Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule,
my little fast and my little prayer.

I strive to cleanse my mind of all evil thoughts and my heart of all evil intents.
Now what more should I do?"

"Abba Joseph rose up and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers
became like ten lamps of fire.

He answered, "Why not be totally changed into fire?"

(Michael Battle. "Wild Fire". *The Christian Century*. October 17, 2001)

Why settle for little effort and little piety, when we could all be changed into fire?

And sometimes I think we settle for being Presbyterian,
instead of being like Jesus, whom we are called to emulate.

We settle into the Church,
its order and its Book of Order, its rules and traditions,

instead of loving God, and Jesus' rule of radical discipleship.
We settle for ecclesiology, for church talk about how many years
we've been treading water in a certain tradition,
when we should be immersed in theology, in God talk about
God's mysterious claim upon our lives,
and Jesus' transformative power to regenerate us
in our brokenness again and again.

Our true love, our heart's true desire should be Jesus.
And our hearts should be unsettled and restless,
until they rest in him, as Augustine has said.

At a recent conference at Montreat called *The Church Unbound*,
four questions were asked of conferees,
"What is the church you are dreaming of?
What is standing in the way? What are you going to do about it?
Who else can you dream with?".....

God's ultimate dream for the church is expressed in the parables of Jesus.
And God's dream for us is not one of settling.
Jesus does not settle for a mustard seed that only grows into a tiny bonsai tree,
limiting which birds of the air may find a perching place;
Jesus does not settle for God as a woman who skimps on yeast,
failing to permeate all flour everywhere with its rising power;
Jesus does not settle for treasure unfound, or for oysters unshucked;
or for anything less than unbridled joy at the discovery of something
beyond thinkable value;
Nor does Jesus settle for netting only certain varieties of fish;
all are hauled into the boat, all are brought to shore,
and then it is up to God's angels to sort into baskets,
and to do the judging.

Jesus parables are a marriage of a common reality and his divine imagination,

that possess the power to ignite our imagination like 10 lamps of fire,
and invite us to envision and enter an alternative reality
where God's true love for all humanity ultimately will be made manifest.
They speak of trees big enough for the whole peaceable kingdom to find roost,
of sufficient yeasty dough to bake bread for a hungry world,
of net-loads of fish to feed 5,000+,
of underground hidden treasure
more valuable than all the earth's oil fields,
and of that pearl, the one thing that matters most of all.

For God so loved the world, truly loved the world,
that he dared not settle for anything less
than giving his only begotten Son, his priceless treasure,
his most precious pearl,
that whoever believes in him should not perish,
but should inherit the Kingdom.

And because God never settles, neither should we. Amen.