

**“Biblical Karma”**  
**Genesis 29:15-35**  
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**8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**July 30, 2017**

What comes around goes around. Jacob, the young buck who tricked his firstborn brother, ends up stuck with the firstborn daughter of his Uncle Laban. Biblical karma at its best. I know we’re supposed to be rooting for Jacob. He is God’s chosen, and Esau isn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but I get a deep seated satisfaction when a swindler and a trickster gets a taste of his own medicine. The reckless, speeding driver gets surprised by the blue lights, the corrupt cops get prosecuted for their corruption, the obstructionist political party collapses under the weight of its own obstructionism. I get a warm and fuzzy feeling inside watching power plus arrogance equal the loss of power.

What comes around goes around. That seems to be the plain meaning of this text - the meaning I was taught in Sunday School: you might get God’s blessing but don’t let it go to your head; the higher they rise, the harder they fall; you shall reap what you sow. That is the narrative so many of us long for in our culture. It’s the plotline of most every action film, the hope behind every bit of investigative journalism, the ideology that drives our justice system. Actions have consequences. No one is above the long arm of the law.

Yet I’m troubled at the women in this text who are collateral damage in what otherwise might be a tidy, little morality play. First of all, there’s Leah, Laban’s first-born daughter who gets married to a man who doesn’t want to marry her. Normally, I’d say “imagine what it’s like to be married to someone who doesn’t want to be married to you,” but the text doesn’t leave that up to our imagination. It tells us that Leah is not loved. Then there’s Rachel who is used by her father as a pawn to get 7 more years of labor from Jacob and the good fortune that seems to come just by having him around. Leah and Rachel are the victims of the ego war between Uncle and nephew. They are the victims in this machismo contest of wits. They are the victims of what comes around goes around.

At least that’s what I was hoping I’d find – the innocent victim. You know – like in most of the action films, in most of the investigative journalism, in most of crime and punishment stories: bad characters and good characters; clear moral lines that we can learn from; a straightforward teaching; abusive power in the wrong, innocent victim in the right.

I thought that’s what I had found in Leah – an *innocent* victim. Leah this poor girl – a pawn in her father’s trickery – unloved by her husband and maybe her father, too. Surely she must be the victim. *The good one*. That’s why God gives her children, the text seems to suggest. When the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, God opened her womb.” God couldn’t stand to see this victim unloved. It was too much.

But then there are *Leah and Rachel’s victims* - Bilhah and Zilpah. The servants – the handmaids who are forced (in the next chapter) to bear more children to Jacob in a rivalry race to be the sister who produces more children. We

don't even get to know their feelings in the situation. They aren't important enough for the text to share their inner thoughts.

By the time you get deep in the muck of this family, it's hard to find any innocent victims. It's nearly impossible to divide the family into good characters and bad ones. It leaves you wondering, why in the world are we going to this story for any kind of spiritual guidance? The trickery, the polygamy, the coercive even abusive relationships, the family backstabbing. Some Christians have tried to get movies a lot less provocative than this material, banned in the theaters. Why do we allow it in our holy book?

It's a question that leads a lot of people to forsake the church's beliefs or at least what some have been told should be the church's beliefs. The text contains stuff they feel ethically obliged to object: the violence of God; the patriarchy and oppression of women; the mistreatment of sexual minorities in a few verses that the church obsesses over. "I can't believe God is like *that*," I've heard them say, "so I have to reject all of it." It's not a bad instinct. If the Bible is encouraging people to act like this family, we shouldn't be reading it.

The church has so often just addressed the problem in the same way, but from the opposite side of the argument. "If you question one verse," I've been challenged on many occasions, "there's nothing stopping you from picking and choosing through the whole thing."

We demand purity from our faith, whether that purity comes from the left or the right. Good characters who are *entirely good*. Bad characters who are *decisively bad*. We can't deal with blessed people who don't always act like a blessing. We can't deal with chosen people who don't live up to our holy expectations. We want our faith heroes pure so that we can clearly separate the good from the bad and line ourselves up with the good..

We demand a purity in our faith that is never achieved in the book that is supposed to guide. Abraham, the patriarch of our faith is also the one who does not always trust God's promise. David, the great King is also the one who commits adultery and has his mistresses' husband killed in battle. Sarah the matriarch of our faith plays favorites with her children and tricks her firstborn son out of his rightful blessing. Moses, the liberator, doubts and disobeys God. This is as true of the institutions in the Bible as it is of individuals. Israel establishes the monarchy which saves the people from the anarchy of violence but it also leads them recreates the slavery economics and idolatry that leads them into exile. The temple is the place where God resides but also becomes the place where people think they can substitute their religious purity for social justice. The church is the community where the early church shares everything in common but also the place that tears each other apart over who sits where and who eats what and who gets to speak.

We demand a purity from our Bible that it never achieves. We demand flawless heroes and the Bible gives us wounded wrestlers, rehabilitated killers, transformed tax collectors, and vulnerable prostitutes. If you stick with this Bible long enough you start to wonder, maybe the problem isn't with our salacious storybook. Maybe it's with us. We human beings who demand a kind of purity in the people of the world that we never find in the text. We human beings who think God only comes to people who are worthy or "spiritual" or perfect. We human

beings who prefer the plotlines to action films over the truth of real life warning us that “what comes around goes around” leaves little room for actual human relationships.

Maybe that’s what’s so destructive in our national politics at the moment. We keep fantasizing that we are going to destroy our opposition instead of having to work with them. Maybe that’s what’s so destructive in our families - we fantasize that we are going to beat our enemies instead of having to love them. Maybe that’s what’s so destructive sometimes inside our churches - fantasizing that we the good guys are going to beat out the bad guys when we should know by now that it is impossible to be good without learning how to love the people you most want to hate. There is no way around relating to people who are worse than “not perfect.” People who are broken, devious, deceitful, hateful, hurtful.

It’s not that God condones bad behavior. In fact, God is absent from most of the text today. God doesn’t tell Jacob to go get a wife from his Uncle – his father does that. God doesn’t come up with Laban’s shenanigans. He does that on his own. God doesn’t guide Jacob to dislike Leah. God doesn’t tell Leah and Rachel to give their servants to their husband for more children.

God appears one time in chapter 29 – to a person who feels unloved. To the underdog who this time is the firstborn. To gift her with children so she’ll have somebody to love. It’s the one statement that God seems to want to make in the middle of all this mess: wherever love is absent there I’m going to bring it. No one is outside the reach of the long arm of God’s love.

And maybe the text is hoping that if we can see that in Jacob’s family. . . if we can see how God’s promises flow through families and institutions and individuals who aren’t perfect, how God’s love isn’t earned but gifted, how trickery may produce short-term gains, but love transforms lives through relationship. . . maybe the text is hoping that our families, our churches, our lives, our politics will learn that it’s almost impossible to defeat your enemies for good. It’s almost impossible to win when your only guiding principle is to wash your hands of “what comes around goes around.” We see where that guiding principle takes us – more brokenness, more winners and losers, more enmity, more strife, more grief, more murder, more hopeless. That may be the way of the world, but God can only stand outside of it for so long. It’s like God wants us to see, if you want a different outcome in the world you’ve got to learn to live it. If you want more love you’ve got to bring it. If you want more relationship you’ve got to bring it. If you want less heartlessness you’ve got to bring it.

No one wins in this story. Esau and Jacob will reconcile. Leah and Rachel give birth to future kings. Bilhah and Zilpah may be some of the only women servants whose names are etched forever in a nation’s history. No one wins at the expense of the other. I hope we can see that and soon. Because what comes around does go around. Hatred of the other has consequences. We will all reap what is being sown. And loving each other is the only thing that can overcome.