

March 19, 2023

Witness to the End  
Genesis 31: 25-27, 43-50 | Matthew 12: 46-50

Though it is dressed up in the pious vocabulary of covenant, today's text from Genesis is best understood as a divorce decree. It's an ending in a family, the final resolution to relationships that were loving and conflicted, affectionate and untrusting. It's complicated.

The separation agreement puts to rest a family feud involving two men that had consumed all the women and children around them. "These daughters are my daughters," Laban declares, without a second thought to the treatment of women as possessions of property, "and these children are my children, these flocks are my flocks, and all that you see, it is mine." Laban stands opposite Jacob, his nephew, who guards behind him Rachel and Leah, Laban's daughters now married to him, along with more than a dozen children and countless herds of livestock that Jacob stole from Laban's fields. Legally speaking - in the ancient custom - the women were property of their father until they were married to Jacob, who believed that he had bought them from Laban by fourteen years of contracted labor. With another six years of managing Laban's fields, he believed he had also purchased a portion of his uncle's herds. Now, after more than two decades indentured to his Aramaen uncle, having finally paid off all his debts, Jacob wants to move his family back home to his own parents, Rebekah and Isaac. But at every turn in the management of Laban's estate, the patriarch has compounded his nephew's debt and extended the period of his contract. Having grown convinced that his uncle never intended to let him go free, the younger man has made a break for it. He's made off with the best of Laban's sheep and goats, and his wife Rachel has even stolen all of her father's most valuable icons and relics. So here we stand on a remote hilltop of Gilead, Jacob fondling a rock in his hand and determined to break loose from family commitments that will not let him go.

"Gather stones!" Jacob shouts, the tension rising as he faces off with Laban. But in a surprising twist to the narrative of the chase, it's not a warcry, but a peace settlement. "Now come," Laban replies, "let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me." When I say that what we have here is a divorce decree, I don't mean that it brings to an end the relationship of two spouses

literally. But their conflict was a legal and emotional entanglement over the marriages of Leah and Rachel. In separating the households, Laban keeping his estate in Aram, and Jacob going with his wives back to his mother's country, the whole family reaches a peaceful, though painful settlement, that is the path out of continued conflict degrading to both sides. It is an active choice to say goodbye so that they will not be consumed by violence. Together they lay stone upon stone making a great heap of an altar. Laban made an oath by the name of his gods, and Jacob swore an oath before the God of Sarah and Abraham. They sacrificed one of the lambs in the herd and put their quarrel to rest by breaking bread together. Early the next morning, Laban kissed goodbye his daughters and grandchildren, and returned home. Jacob, along with Leah and Rachel, the children and animals they had between them, left in the other direction.

The text makes me think of another story of an ending. Maybe you saw the Oscar nominated film, *The Banshees of Inisherin*. It's about the ending of a friendship. Two men in a rural Irish hamlet spend most of their time together drinking in a pub until one of them says it's time to break up. Colm says their lifelong friendship has run its course. What do you mean, Padraig says? Padraig reacts with confusion, grief, and anger. He does everything he can think of to repair his relationship with Colm. Colm just insists that there's no explanation for it, there's no reason. He just doesn't want to be friends anymore.

"Now, if I've done somethin' to ya, just tell me what I've done to ya. And if I've said somethin' to ya or maybe if I've said somethin' when I was drunk and forgotten it. But I don't think I've said somethin' when I was drunk and I've forgotten it. But if I did, then tell me what it was. And I'll say sorry for that too Colm. With all me heart, I'll say sorry. Just stop running away from me like some fool of a moody school child."

"But you didn't say anything to me. And you didn't do anything to me. I just don't like ya no more."

"You do like me."

"I don't."

"But you liked me yesterday."

"Oh, did I, yeah?"

"I thought you did."

I suppose we could take Colm at his word, that he's ending the friendship merely because he's had this change of heart. But it seems more likely to me that these

men aren't able to express themselves to each other. Who knows what happened in the past. Who knows if what Colm says about his feelings is true.

At the endings in our lives, our words fail to express what we truly feel. The reasons we give to justify ourselves often mislead. We may not even know what our hearts feel at such moments, and if we do know we may not be honest with ourselves about it. There is a tradition among some values-centered therapists who say that you should pay attention to those relationships in your life that cause you pain because the pain is a sign of how much you care.

So if it is a spouse with whom you have irreconcilable differences. The sadness, the anger, the conflict are not signs of failure; you can interpret all those feelings and behaviors in another way - as symptoms of love. So if it is a longtime friend from whom you've grown apart. So if it is a child whose choices have broken your heart. So if it is a grandparent who has passed away. Or an aunt or uncle who don't know how to let go. As the endings come the grief may take you by surprise, loss felt so deeply because of the depth of love.

Since we're speaking of endings here, and some of those endings being the loss of marriages, we should acknowledge the multiple biblical perspectives on this question. In some places the Hebrew Bible prohibits divorce. Jesus speaks harshly against it. And in other places, according to the Bible, the law allows it, in many cases with special attention to the economic circumstances of women. But there is no "biblical view" of divorce, no chapter and verse that resolves the moral question once and for all. There are only multiple biblical perspectives on the question. It must be that this question arises so frequently and is judged so differently by various sources and authorities because the endings in our lives are so emotional, so complicated, and so painful. The laws that speak against it are dribbled in and woven around countless stories like the one we've read today which speak overwhelmingly of grace.

Here is one where the ending is met not by judgment and shame, but rather is marked by an act of worship and a communion meal. The language of covenant is artfully deployed not to bring together but to bless in setting apart. So let it be said that these endings in our lives - moments of such pain and sites of so much second guessing and rumination - are occasions for faithfulness. The covenant is not broken. The covenant is renewed! The ending is a gift of the Spirit if it creates space for new life. If it is a choice to surrender, to stop the fight, to find the peace then it is a great act of trust. We cannot come to any ending that matters without

grief because grief is the enduring seal of love. The counterweight to grief is hope. Hope, that is, faith in the blessings yet to come, the promise of new life, the gift of a new covenant. Hope - that is, life in Jesus Christ.