

## **Mizpah**

Genesis 31: 44-50; Acts 4: 13-21

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### **I. Introduction**

So, 30 to 40 years or so ago, when I was in high school and college, I earned money by working over at the Cathedral. And I had a couple of different jobs there, one of which was working in the gift shop which was great fun because they had a good bookstore and a lot of fun people to work with. And one of the big sellers in the cathedral gift shop was a pair of pendants that couples could buy and when you put them together, they formed a heart. And inside the heart was written this very beautiful line from our Genesis text that says, "The Lord watch between me and thee while we are parted one from another." And then, the heart was broken in two and each half of a couple would wear this little pendant as a sort of blessing for the other when they were separate from each other. This blessing is called the Mizpah which is a Hebrew word that means "watchtower" and comes from the pillar of rocks that is set up in this story.

Now, when this line is printed on a piece of heart-shaped jewelry or sometimes you'll see it on tombstones of a couple who have died separated by some period of years, it reads as and is intended to be a prayer that God watch over a loved one who is separate from us that we can't watch over ourselves, and in that sense, is a very lovely and affectionate sentiment to share with a significant other. The irony of course is that in this story from Genesis, Jacob and Laban aren't particularly affectionate or loving with each other. They in fact hate each other and distrust each other. And so, this line has in its context a very different meaning than is often seen outside of its scriptural context.

We're beginning a sermon series this day that's going to run for the next couple of weeks through August that I'm calling, "I do not think that means what you think it means." And if those of you have seen *The Princess Bride*, you'll know what that line is about, because one of the characters in *The Princess Bride* always misuses a particular word. If you haven't seen *The Princess Bride* by the way, and I'm going to assume because many of you aren't laughing, that you haven't, I'm going to really encourage you to go home and watch that because it's a must-see movie and there's some great material in it, great preaching material which may come back at some point. So, you should definitely go and watch that this afternoon because it's worth a look. For those of you who haven't, don't worry about it though because basically what we're going to be looking at is some scripture passages that are often misused or misquoted and then look at sort of the original context and what we can learn from them.

### **II. Jacob and Laban**

In this wonderful story of Jacob and Laban, we have yet another chapter in the ongoing Genesis story of dysfunctional families. And the way the story starts, of course, is that Jacob has fled his home in Israel because he has stolen his brother's, Esau's, birthright and he has tricked his brother and father, Isaac, into having Isaac give him his blessing, and Esau is so angry about this whole thing, he's planning on killing Jacob. So, Jacob's mother, Rebecca, sends him to her hometown of Haran. And Jacob goes and begins to live with his uncle, Laban, and worked for Laban. He very quickly falls in love with Laban's daughter, Rachel, and agrees to work seven years for Laban to earn the right to marry Rachel.

On the wedding night, Jacob has had too much to drink and Laban substitutes in Rachel's older sister, Leah, to force Jacob to marry Leah instead because he's having a hard time finding a suitable husband for her. This doesn't feel like a really good technique from my standpoint, but that's what happens. So, then Laban forces Jacob to work another seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel. So, you can tell right from the beginning this is going to be a sort of fraught relationship. And over the decades that Jacob lives with Laban, there's an ongoing struggle between the two of them over all sorts of things but particularly around Jacob's compensation for the work that he's doing and how they share the profits of their very successful sheep-raising business. And so, for decades these two were sort of working at outwitting each other, until finally Jacob throws in the towel and just says, "This is no way to live," and he's right, and in the middle of the night, he packs up his whole family and all of their flocks and all of their household belongings and he flees back to his homeland.

When Laban finds out that Jacob has fled with his daughters and his grandchildren and his sheep, he is furious and he rounds up all of his soldiers and races after Jacob. And after a couple of days, he catches up to Jacob and then the climactic moment in this story, God intercedes and in a dream tells Laban that he is not allowed to kill Jacob and he's got to let Jacob and the family go their way. But the two of them after this dream still come together and have this very contentious showdown in which they are very clear with each other they don't trust each other, they don't like each other but we've got to figure out how to live at least in the same family. And they come to this agreement that Jacob is going to care for appropriately Laban's daughters and not marry other women and not place them in a subservient role in the household. They've set up this pillar that's going to be a dividing line between their lands and they're not going to cross over that dividing line with an intent to harm the other so that's a non-aggression pact, essentially. And they close it out with this prayer, essentially, that says, "The Lord watch between thee and me while we are parted one from another."

But these are not words of love and affection. These are words born out of distrust and anger and frustration and they're said more like, "The Lord watch between you and me while we're yet parted from one another because I know if God is not watching you, you're going to do something underhanded." And frankly, they're both probably right because both of them up to this point in the story have lived all of their lives trying to trick and deceive the other.

### **III. So what can we learn from the actual passage of the Mizpah?**

So, what can we learn from this wonderful story of family dysfunction? A couple of things I think are helpful reminders for us. Nobody in the story, I should be clear, is a hero. Jacob of course is one of our patriarchs and ends up becoming a significant religious leader but thus far in the story, he's not an enormously attractive character, nor is Laban. So, this is not a story where there's a lot of good guys and bad guys. Everybody is pretty mixed. And the first thing I think that we learn from the story is the importance and the value of being able to honestly articulate what is going on in a relationship when something is broken.

Jacob and Laban don't like or trust each other, both with good reason. I wouldn't want Jacob as a son-in-law, nor would I frankly want Laban as a father-in-law. But the two of them are able to at least articulate that to each other so there's some clarity in what's going on. And I think that's a helpful reminder to us because we as Christians often fall very quickly into a habit of equating being loving with being nice, right? We are called to be loving to our family, to our friends, and as Jesus notes, even to our enemies. But what loving means is that we are always acting for the betterment of the other person. It means that we are working so that they can grow and thrive as God wants them to grow and thrive. That does not necessarily mean being nice to them. And we specialize in being nice.

My friend, Chuck Cochran has a great line when he describes people from Iowa. Chuck is from Iowa, and he says, "We drive for miles and miles to come to an intersection so that we can yield to one another." And it often feels like that in churches. We put such a high premium on being nice to one another, sometimes it's very hard to tease out what the actual truth is. And as most of us know from one context or another, often parenting, helping another person grow, acting in a loving way towards another person does not always mean being nice. Sometimes it means being very clear about what the boundaries are. We know this on an instinctual level when we parent because we know that we love our children, we want them to grow and to thrive and sometimes that means saying, "That was a boundary that you should not have crossed." And we say that because we love our children.

The same is true of the other relationships around us. It's important to be able to be clear and honest about what's going on in the midst of a relationship. Because we all have people like Jacob and Laban in our lives, amen? And we've got to figure out where those boundaries are in terms of healthy interaction. They may well be family members. All of us have family members that we struggle with. We don't talk about it a lot because, again, that's not polite and nice, but we all have family members that we struggle with. We often have school friends or school acquaintances that are a struggle. We have work colleagues that are a struggle or bosses that are a struggle. And that's not to say that we're always right and they're always in the wrong. It may be a dysfunction of the other, it may be our own dysfunctionality, or most often I think it's

an unfortunate combination of personality traits that just doesn't make the relationship click the way we would like it to.

Being able to articulate where those places are is important in terms of establishing healthy relationships. Being able to talk about where the boundaries are. And again, Jacob and Laban are very good about this. Jacob and Laban are very clear about where the boundary is and there's going to be physical boundary, "I'm not crossing over into your space, you're not crossing over into my space so let's be clear and articulate about that."

One of the things that we struggle within a lot of our problematic relationships is figuring out how to articulate where the boundary is, "Here is what I'm willing to do for you. Here is what I'm not willing to do for you." How do we say that to a family member who wants to borrow money or a colleague who has stepped into our area of work when it's not their business?

We were talking about Casey Elliot's pregnancy before the service staff meeting this morning and Drema McAllister-Wilson reminded me of one of our pastoral colleagues who stood up in the pulpit when she was pregnant and told the congregation, "I'm so excited we're pregnant and expecting a child. Don't anybody touch my stomach." Just put that out there. Now those of you who are women and who have been pregnant before know that there's a piece of what happens there that random strangers feel like they can come up and touch your stomach. Now, some people that doesn't bother, other people it does. But this pastoral colleague of ours was very clear in saying, "Here is my boundary. I love you. I want you to be excited. Please don't touch me." That's a good boundary to articulate if that's where you are.

Peter and John did the same thing with the Sanhedrin in our passage from Acts this morning. Peter and John have just miraculously healed someone and then used that as a springboard to start talking about the power of Jesus Christ in the world. And the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, the leaders, are really uncomfortable because they don't want them talking about Jesus. They can't deny that this guy has been healed but they haul Peter and John in there and they say, "Listen. Don't talk about Jesus." And the Sanhedrin are used to having their way because they're the folks that have the education and the money and the power and when they say do this, they're used to people saying okay. And I love Peter and John in this story because this whole council of the elders are in judgment essentially over these two poor, uneducated fishermen. They're used to rolling these kind of folks.

And Peter and John say, "You know what, we would love to respect your authority and do what you want us to do, but you know what, God told us to do something differently. And while we want to be helpful and cooperative, we're going to have to do what God told us to do and be who God called us to be rather than who you want us to be." That's good boundary setting. That's honest, upfront, "Here is where I am, here is where you are, and we may have to disagree on this."

Some of those boundaries we can agree on. Jacob and Laban agree on a boundary. They don't like each other. They don't trust each other. But they come to an agreement, "Here is where the boundary is going to be and we're going to respect that." With the Sanhedrin and Peter and John, they don't agree, but Peter and John still set the boundary for them, "God has called us to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. We're going to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter what you tell us."

So, our ability to set those boundaries with people in our lives that are problematic for us is an important part of figuring out how we can be healthy and faithful in being who God has called us to be.

The last point that I want to hold up is that -- and it's a very classically Methodist point. Methodists are big on structure, right? We like having systems in place for prayer, for Bible study, for how to run a church. The last point that Jacob and Laban offer us is they set up a structure of accountability for how they're going to engage one another. They set up literally a pillar, "Here is the boundary line. Don't cross it." And it's a wonderful mnemonic device because if they happen to be walking along in the countryside and they see that pillar, immediately they know what the boundary is. Most of us have wonderful intentions about how to live better and more honest and direct and healthier, emotional lives. But it's one thing to say, "I'm going to do it better the next time," and it's a different thing to say, "Here is the structure I'm putting in place to make sure I do it better the next time." So, what Jacob and Laban invite us to think about is what are the structures that we put in place to allow us to engage one another in difficult issues in a healthier way.

Tiny example, if you have a family member who may want to, for example, borrow money that you're not comfortable with, one of the ways to deal with that is to articulate to yourself ahead of time, here is how much money I'm willing to part with and here is how much I'm not, and then maybe that's a dialogue you have with your spouse or significant other or sibling or somebody who can then help with some accountability because when you get in the middle of a hard conversation it's sometimes easy to lose sight of the intention that you have. But if you tell a spouse or a significant other or sibling, "Okay. I'm not going to loan Uncle Joe any money, and when we have dinner I need you to help me do that." You set up a structure so that you can help hold yourself to the goal that you have set. Because boundaries are hard. It's easy to articulate them when we're on our own, but when we get in the middle of a conflict, when Laban is right in our face, shouting at us, it's easy to lose sight. So, what are the structures that we put in place to live healthier, emotional lives?

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This prayer of the Mizpah is a very beautiful line, "The Lord watch between thee and me while we are parted one from another." And if somebody happens to give you a little necklace with a Mizpah on it, you should assume that it's a sign of love and

affection and not necessarily a sign that they don't trust you. But it's a helpful reminder that to live healthy lives with one another involves more than simply being nice. Love involves more than being nice. Love involves always acting in a way that allows the other person to live more richly, more fully, more honestly, more healthily, and in doing that allows us to do the same.

Amen.