

Shutting Down the Idol Factory

Part 7 – Finding Your Ultimate Soulmate

Genesis 29:15-30

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 8, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” ¹⁹ Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” ²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵ When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” ²⁶ Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” ²⁸ Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. ²⁹ (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years. (Genesis 29:15-30, NRSV)

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Eros is one of the Greek gods you may already know something about. And even if you’re not familiar with him, you most certainly are familiar with his work. Traditionally, Eros was the god of love, specifically romantic love. We get our English word ‘erotic’ from his name.

Get the image of Cupid out of your mind. Eros was not an overfed baby flitting around the clouds with a bow and arrow. In fact, Eros was thought to be one of the oldest gods, a god who appeared self-born at the beginning of time to spur on procreation among mortals and other gods by fostering irresistible romantic attraction between the sexes. He was a force to be reckoned with because who could ever resist his lure. If it was love at first sight, if you just couldn’t get her out of your mind, if at last you have found your knight in shining armor, it was Eros whom you had to thank.¹

Clearly the ancient Greeks had no problem associating the erotic with the divine. One of the unfortunate realities of our day is that we have severed that connection. For many people, in fact, romance, eroticism, and sex itself, are matters we would prefer not to associate with God. Even many Christians today have a hard time imagining God has anything other than an indifferent tolerance towards all things sexual. For many people the life of a faithful Christian and the life of a sexually fulfilled person are mutually exclusive. You can have one or the other but you can’t have both. Some people even have a hard time seeing how one can be married and sexually fulfilled at the same time!

What’s funny about all this is that the Bible never speaks about the erotic in this way. In the Bible God is never portrayed as the prude so many people think he is. In fact, scripture boldly declares that sexuality has been given to humanity from God as a sacred and beautiful gift of his invention, a gift he intends to be enjoyed and protected and cherished. The Bible only speaks negatively about the misuse or abuse of this gift, never negatively about the gift itself. In fact, there’s an entire book of the Bible, the Song of Solomon, devoted exclusively to the beauty of erotic love between marriage partners. Listen to a passage of the poetry found there:

¹ Some of this information on Eros comes from Michael Stapleton, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1978), 80.

How fair and pleasant you are,
 O loved one, delectable maiden!
 You are stately as a palm tree,
 and your breasts are like its clusters.
 I say I will climb the palm tree
 and lay hold of its branches.
 O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
 and the scent of your breath like apples,
 and your kisses like the best wine
 that goes down smoothly,
 gliding over lips and teeth.²

When it is enjoyed in the context in which God gave it to be enjoyed, erotic love is a beautiful and good gift from a Father in Heaven who loves to give good gifts to his children. That being said, if this good thing were ever to become for us an ultimate thing, if we ever begin to cherish this gift more than we cherish the Giver of this gift, then romantic love and even marriage will become for us an idol, a false and empty god that will never be able to deliver what it is we are asking it to deliver. Remember that only God can give to us ultimate security, and identity and meaning in life. When we seek those things from something other than God we have made a good thing into an ultimate thing.

And herein is the problem with erotic love. We live in a culture, not so unlike other cultures, which worships at the altar of Eros. When Mic Jagger sang on behalf the rest of his generation, "I can't get no satisfaction" he wasn't singing about God. For him, and for so many others like him in our world today, deep satisfaction and fulfillment in life are not thought to be possible unless Eros comes your way.

I had a friend in high school who could never be without a girlfriend. He'd be with one girl for a while and then something wouldn't work out. Sometimes they just weren't compatible. Sometimes she'd end up with somebody else. Sometimes, to be honest, he would find a certain girl desirable until he won her over and then he'd almost instantly lose interest as if the chase was what he was really after. Either way, whenever one relationship ended it wouldn't be more than a week or two before he'd be in another relationship. You could set your clock by it. As I look back I have to wonder what it does to a person when from the time they are 13 or 14 years old they have never really learned to simply grow and develop as an individual person apart from always being connected romantically to somebody else. I hate to think how much of my friend's identity, and security and meaning in life back then was all tied up in having a girlfriend by his side.

To be honest I used to envy my friend. You see, when I was in high school I was a very timid young man when it came to interactions with the opposite sex. As it turns out, what I saw then as a curse I later came to see as a blessing. Truth is my shyness sheltered me from experiencing a lot of the heartache and trouble some of my more daring friends experienced. Still, back then I thought it was a curse. I remember the day when I realized that all my friends had at some point had a girlfriend, all my friends except me, and I remember thinking to myself that because of this my life in some way was less fulfilled and complete.

I hope you can see that this is the underlying but firm conviction of our culture. In general, we don't admire singleness. We may admire the person who puts off marriage or even serious romantic commitment for a time in favor of pursuing an education or a career. What we don't admire, however, is the person who is never willing or able to find the soul mate we believe everybody needs if they are to live a complete and fulfilled life. Of course, not everyone these days thinks marriage is the answer. For an increasing number of people, making your lover your legal husband or wife is optional. But even for those people, life is still believed to be more fulfilled if you live it alongside a soul-mate, a romantic partner with whom you can share life.

Like many of you I enjoyed the Disney movie *Frozen* which came out a year or two ago. It's the wonderful story of two sisters Anna and Elsa which captivated people of all ages, in part because it didn't exactly follow the well-worn script of most Disney love stories. You know how it usually goes, girl meets boy and for a variety of reasons the two of them, at first, have little to no chance of ever finding love together. Think Beauty and the Beast, Jasmine and Aladdin, Ariel the mermaid and Prince Eric, even Lady and the Tramp. None of these couples at first seemed like compatible lovers but all

² Song of Solomon 7:6-9

of them eventually find their way into one another's arms, or paws as the case may be. So, you see, I had been so conditioned by these stories that all through *Frozen* I felt certain it was only a matter of time before Kristoff, the awkward ice delivery man, and Anna the princess would beat the odds and end up in a passionate kiss before the credits rolled.

I was shocked then when it seemed that Disney was instead going to end the movie with the sisters Anna and Elsa coming together against all odds and embracing in the finale. Was it possible that Disney could make a love story that didn't end with romantic love? Was it possible that Kristoff and Anna would simply be satisfied with the wonderful friendship which had developed between the two of them? No. Disney couldn't resist. And I bet most of us were glad for it, maybe even relieved. Something seems to us incomplete in life if Eros doesn't get to bestow his gift upon us in the end.

In the story we read earlier from Genesis we meet Jacob, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, as he is fleeing his family. This is a young man who has been manipulated by his mother and neglected by his father who favored his older brother Esau. Jacob is on the run because he has cheated his brother and deceived his father and run off to his mother's brother, his uncle Laban. Laban offers Jacob a job as a servant. But when Laban asks Jacob what wages he would like to receive Jacob responds, "Uncle, I will serve you for seven years if you would give me your daughter Rachel as my wife." Laban responds, "Well, it would be better to give her to you than to another man." Technically, it's not an agreement but Jacob, nonetheless, hears it as a 'yes.' The deceiver is about to be deceived.

The problem here is that Jacob is overwhelmed with passion for Rachel who was, we're told, a strikingly beautiful woman. He's lovesick and lovesickness, as maybe you know from personal experience, can quickly blur a person's judgment. Biblical commentators point out that seven years' wage was an enormous price to pay as a dowry in those days. Jacob, however, quickly agrees to pay it and, we're told, those seven years seemed to him like only a few days. Furthermore, notice that as soon as the time is up Jacob goes immediately to Laban and asks for Rachel. In the Hebrew his request is uncharacteristically bold and graphic. Basically he's says to Laban, "I can't wait to have sex with your daughter Rachel. Give her to me now!"³ Many a future son-in-law may have felt this way; few, however, have been bold enough or stupid enough to verbalize their feelings to a future father-in-law.

This is a man who is overwhelmed with erotic passion. There is some emptiness in his life which he is convinced can only be filled by the love of this woman and so the prospect of being with her has absolutely captivated his heart. Of course, it's not hard to imagine why that emptiness existed. Considering all the brokenness in his family there must have been a deep insecurity in the heart of Jacob. And which one of us cannot relate? As a young man I remember that insecurity, an insecurity I imagined might largely disappear if somehow the right girl would agree that I was worth being with. I wish I could tell you all those insecurities faded away with age.

Well, we know what happens next. On the anniversary of Jacob's seventh year of employment, Laban throws a party and then late in the evening takes his daughter to Jacob who immediately takes her into his tent to consummate the marriage. It's dark. He's with a woman he has never been this physically close to before. He's probably a bit intoxicated from the wedding feast. The result is that Jacob has no idea until the light of day that he has actually consummated his marriage to Laban's older daughter Leah.

Jacob is furious. But what really can the deceiver say when he has himself been deceived? What's remarkable is that when Laban then suggests, with a clear promise this time, to give his daughter Rachel after another seven years of service, Jacob agrees without hesitation. As one commentator puts it, Jacob's behavior here is the behavior of an addict because an addict will sacrifice everything to get that which he or she thinks will ultimately satisfy.⁴ It's the woman who only believes she can feel good about herself if she is in the arms of a man. It's the man who will sacrifice his marriage and his relationship with his children for the novelty of another woman. It's the person who can never recover from a romantic breakup which naturally should have led to heartache but should not have led to total despair.

Eventually Jacob gets the girl. But if you know the story you know that even when he is finally married to Rachel, Jacob's life, especially his family life, never really satisfies and fulfills. The emptiness in his life is not filled but only

³ See the commentary on this passage from Timothy Keller in *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Riverhead, 2009), 26-27. I've relied heavily here and elsewhere in this message on his commentary on this passage.

⁴ Keller, p. 33.

passed on to his children. Because he favors Rachel over Leah he favors Rachel's children over Leah's children, which leads to tremendous jealousy and even murderous hatred between his children. God, of course, uses all of it for good as God always does with those he loves but still the road for Jacob and his family does not become smooth just because he gets the girl he thought would make everything right.

Pastor and author Tim Keller has been a great help to me in understanding this story of Jacob and what it has to teach us about this idol of a romantic soul mate. In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Keller offers this powerful insight, "No person, not even the best one, can give your soul all it needs. You are going to think you have gone to bed with Rachel, and you will get up and it will always be Leah."⁵ Again, romantic love is a wonderful gift from God. Marriage, of course, is an even more wonderful gift. However, if you put the weight of all your deepest hopes and longings on your husband or wife, if you are expecting to gain ultimate identity, security and meaning from having a lover in the first place, not only will your massive expectations do great harm to that relationship, you will also, in the end, be sorely disappointed. Anybody who has been married or in a romantic relationship for some significant amount of time knows this to be true, or ought to know this is true.

Keller says that when you come to realize one day that not even the best marriage is going to bring the ultimate satisfaction in life that we all desire in our souls you have four options.⁶ One, you can blame your partner and imagine the problem is that you are with the wrong person. This option leads to resentment, or adultery, or divorce. It's the way of continued idolatry and spiritual addiction. Let me spend just another seven years and then it will all work out. Two, you can blame yourself. The problem must be with me. That is the way of self-loathing and shame. Three, you can blame the world and allow your heart to become hard and cynical as you give up on the idea of romance and marriage altogether. Finally, you can come to the realization that the problem may not be him, or her, or you, or love and marriage in general. No, the problem may just be that you've been expecting something from Eros that Eros can never deliver.

Let me quote C.S. Lewis at length here because his insight is so brilliant.

Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign county, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we have grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job; but something has evaded us.⁷

I know that we all don't come at this this from the same place. Some of us are in wonderfully loving and healthy marriages that are on a trajectory to last a lifetime. Others of us have only found heartache when it has come to romance and we may have sworn it off in life. Some of us have always longed to find a soul mate in this world and carry around great pain or even shame because we have not yet done so. Some of us, particularly those of us who are younger, look forward to the day when we will meet the man or woman of our dreams and imagine how much fulfillment we will that day find in life. We come from different places and yet some of the same things are still true for all of us.

You see, marriage and even erotic love are beautiful, wonderful gifts from our Father in Heaven. If these are gifts you get to enjoy in this life then you ought to give thanks for those gifts. They are good things. They are not, however, ultimate things. In fact, a life of singleness, even a life of celibacy, can be a wonderfully fulfilled life as long as that life is oriented towards gaining its ultimate identity, and security and meaning from the only source that can provide these things. Remember, who lived the most abundantly fulfilled human life ever lived? Jesus. And Jesus was both single and celibate his entire life. He had human relationships with family and friends which were deeply important for him but he never had a lover or a wife. And yet, because his Father was the one in whom he completely abided, life on this earth for him, though extraordinarily hard at times, was never empty or without meaning.

⁵ Keller, p. 39.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow, Collins, 1942), 117. Cited by Tim Keller, p. 38.

Through Christ we are invited into this life as well. Happily married, divorced, heartbroken, single, hoping to be married some day, never planning to be married any day, wherever you are in life the invitation is the same, the invitation into the one relationship, the only relationship, which can ever bring to us ultimate fulfillment.

In Revelation 21, at the very end of the Bible, we are given a beautiful picture of this relationship. In these verses the apostle John is relaying a vision he has received from God about a day when everything in creation will finally be set right again. Listen to a central part of that vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
 “See, the home of God is among mortals.
 He will dwell with them;
 they will be his peoples,
 and God himself will be with them;
 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more;
 mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
 for the first things have passed away.”⁸

Even the best, most loving, longest-lasting marriage in the world begins at a wedding where these words are spoken, “Till death do us part.” By contrast, the relationship into which we all are invited with our Heavenly Father through his son Jesus Christ actually reaches its culmination in the life we will inherit fully someday after death at which time our Father will dwell with us forever in a world where death, and crying, and sadness and pain will have finally passed away and where all things in all places for all time will be made new again.

And if that weren’t amazing enough, this life can begin now because God, in Christ, is not only waiting for us some day but is here alive with us this day. As you turn to him you will find that even if you are by yourself you are never alone. As you trust in him you will find that he alone will never fail you. And as you learn how much he loves you, you will begin to love him in return and love others in our world in ways you never before thought possible.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Genesis 29:15-30 again. What stands out to you from this story?
2. It took fourteen years of servanthood and being married first to the wrong woman for Jacob to finally take Rachel as his wife. Was it worth it?
3. Who do you most feel sorry for in this story? Why? Who, if anybody, do you admire?
4. Do you agree that in our culture we generally believe that a person’s life is most fulfilled if and when they find true love? Who do you believe is generally happier and more fulfilled in life, single people or married people?
5. A theologian named Ernest Becker once wrote, “No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?

⁸ Revelation 21:1-4, NRSV

6. There's an old saying, "Always the bridesmaid never the bride." Is this description meant as a positive thing or a negative thing? Have you ever felt this way?
7. What can the love of God provide for us in life that not even the love of a faithful husband or wife can provide?
8. How does a person enjoy and give thanks for the good things of romance and marriage without letting these good things become ultimate things?