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# Designing Love

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God began by creating the grass that tickles our bare feet, waves to crash into our sandcastles, and all the essentials of life at the time before time.

From the beginning, God set in motion an ongoing, dynamic commotion that persists within the very design of our beings. God embedded into our bodies an inherent drive for food, hydration, shelter, other people. And, God's genius plays out in one person's cravings for vanilla ice cream and another's preference for spicy sausage on a pizza.

Our differences set in motion the energy to expand creation, making it bigger, able to sustain more life. One person slacks a thirst with a craft brew and another guzzles tap water. The need for a dry roof over our head sparks the ingenuity to pull a tarp in the woods or carve slate tiles for homes. The genetics of a person with blue eyes joined to another person with kinky hair produces a never-before marvel of a child to delight parent and grandparent alike.

Every need, every desire, every encounter with another on this earth emerges from God's original sandbox, intent on expanding this universe.

If we only read God's plan through the lens of an ancient covenant written on dry parchment scrolls in legalistic language, or the sterile periodic table of elements, we miss seeing God's grand design written in the stars and our human flesh.

Let's trace the roots of our human family through God's plantings, as told in the Book of Genesis, we know more of ourselves and our future.

God promised Abraham descendants as numerous as the lights of heaven and then seemed to foil the plan with conniving spouses and bickering children.

The plot lines in the old TV series *Dallas* or more recently, *Succession*, pale in comparison to the schemes of our faith ancestors in Genesis. Anyone looking for pure, family values must be disappointed with the deceit, illicit encounters, and a winner-take-all drive.

If scripture preserved only those encounters, we might retreat from one another, particularly family, for fear of being taken advantage of. So nestled within these stories of the generations are chance encounters as charming as summer rom-coms, romantic comedies.

Think of the classic *When Harry Met Sally* with all the vignettes of couples whose affection for one another survived decades of life's ups and downs. Or *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*? Or *La La Land*'s song and dance might charm you.

These tales of unfulfilled desire, a chance meeting, overcoming obstacles, a madcap journey leading to a climactic choice shows that love wins.

All of those rom-coms take their form from our ancient stories.

Today's story of Jacob meeting Rachel charms us and rarely graces pulpits. The stories of Jacob's life that bookend this meeting, expose the deep flaws of human character, as warning bells in our own lives.

In this story, another aspect of God's human design incites the action. Some will claim this is ancillary in the story of Jacob's life and our faith's story. I contend it is exactly the pivotal moment that propels him to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

As a set-up, just before the drama unfolds, Jacob tricks his father, Isaac, and twin brother Esau, out of an inheritance. Even though he won right to wealth and primacy, he must flee for his life. Alone in the desert he endures his first dark night of the soul that Ed Sutter preached last week. God asks, "What are you doing with your life?"

Following this story, Jacob meets another trickster, Laban, who preys upon his weakness. Deceit and lies infest and surround Jacob.

Today's word reveals a precious trait that God designed into every human's life.

Please pray with me...

*Designing God, you made each of us with flaws and charms, passions, and innate needs. Set aside any of our distractions. Silence any voice but yours. Let this ancient story stir in our hearts to remind us how much you desire us to desire one another. Amen.*

## Genesis 29:1-14

Then Jacob lifted his feet and came to the land of the people of the east.

<sup>2</sup>As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered.

The stone on the well's mouth was large, <sup>3</sup>and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

<sup>4</sup>Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?"

They said, "We are from Haran."

<sup>5</sup>He said to them, "Do you know Laban son of Nahor?"

They said, "We do."

<sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Is it well with him?"

"Yes," they replied, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep."

<sup>7</sup>Jacob replied, "Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." <sup>8</sup>But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks



are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.”

<sup>9</sup>While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she kept them.

<sup>10</sup>Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother’s brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother’s brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of his mother’s brother Laban.

<sup>11</sup>Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. <sup>12</sup>And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father.

<sup>13</sup>When Laban heard the news about his sister’s son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house.

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Let me fast forward into the next episode in Jacob’s life.

His Herculean strength to lift the well’s stone cannot protect him. Hopelessly, head-over-heals for Rachel, he gives away seven years of labor, as a bride price, for the chance to marry her. Jacob describes the seven years of work as “only a few days.” Love causes him to lose track of time. Each day, each morning, love got him out of bed and to do what he needed to do to in pursuit of his passion.

On his wedding night, his father-in-law tricks him. Too much booze and a veil over the bride's face shields Jacob from realizing he actually marries Rachel's older sister, Leah. Undaunted and still smitten with Rachel, Jacob agrees to another seven years of labor to finally, finally wed his beloved.

Is the desire for love, to be susceptible to love, to be blinded by love, or any of the cliches of the madcap ways love disrupts life, a good feature of the human condition?

Or, is this a flaw in the mechanics of crafting a good life?

In the original TV series, *Star Trek*, the Vulcan race believes emotions, particularly love, weakens the being and society. Never one to give into emotions, Spock stands as an icon of integrity and stalwart in fulfilling his duties. To craft their version of the master race, they just eliminated those pesky emotions. Yet, one of the memorable romantic encounters of the series occurs during a landing-party meeting between Spock and Leila Kalomi.

On foreign soil, he falls under the influence of local spores that thwart his emotional control. A romance blossoms. It's weird to see pointy-eared, Vulcan, Spock laugh and flirt with a woman. Once he composes himself, he admits in those moments of weakness to feeling truly happy for the first time. Later, in full control of his passion, he treats Kalomi with an unusual gentleness even if he can no longer love her.

Feature or flaw? By making humans vulnerable to love, did God design a feature or flaw into us?

In our faith history, four betrothals begin at a water-well. Hebrew Scholar Robert Alter labels these as a “type-scene” and screen writers would call a “meet cute” encounters. Two people meeting at a water-well signals a holy union will emerge.

Jacob’s parents, Isaac and Rebekah, get connected at a well. Jacob and Rachel and Leah, then Moses and Zipporah, and later Jesus and the Samaritan Woman all meet at a water well.

The stories all progress from: the man journeys, alone, into foreign land, searches for the basic sustenance of life, and he encounters a woman at a well. Someone draws water. The woman runs to announce the visitor’s arrival to the father or community who invites him to a meal.

Perceived limits of “my land, my tribe, my water,” and “your family, your god, and your nation,” all evaporate in light of fierce human need and desire to connect. Common water quenches thirst. Human love ignites. Any barrier separating humans fall away as a sense of belonging and community expands.

All of these stories display God’s hand at work through humans. All create new vistas for life to flourish. And, all of these stories hinge on this feature or flaw, baked into our being, to love someone.

Our desire to be together and to be fruitful does not distract God’s purposes. Our need expresses it. To be bound to

another in love, to support, to need, and be needed can satisfy our deepest yearnings.

Through love, we take part in God's creation; bearing of children, providing hospitality, and joining disparate people into one.

This innate need drives us to be our fullest and best selves – to fulfil our sense of potential as loving, expressive, purposeful people.

Jacob and Rachel's love story shines brightly because scripture tells so few romances, while our faith preserves myriad stories of love connecting people.

Family love lures Jacob back to his family, at the risk of death, to reconcile with his brother and father. God designed Rebekah to love Jacob, with a mother's love evident in all the matriarchs. Ruth commits to Naomi and to God. Paul mentors Timothy into becoming a disciple and lover of God by loving him.

God gives us the desire to love, to see another as God sees, to feel compassion, pursue the other, crazy infatuated, in love, someone worth dedicating your life to be with.

Where are the water wells in your life?

Here's mine. It used to be Oz Park in Chicago, now it is the sidewalk, walking the dog. The opposite of watering the dog.

As reliable as the sunrise, my first dog nosed me out of bed at 5:30. Even if still dark, the rain came at us sideways, or the snow covered the walkways, he needed to go out.

We met the other dogs. I learned their names, but rarely the owner's name. I got to know these nameless owners, their family sagas, health frailties, vacation plans, anxieties, and dreams. Occasionally I learned their names.

Our morning routine, to satisfy a basic canine need, opened a safe place for me to become vulnerable as well. My dog friends held my fear when I told them, before family or other friends, that I felt called to ministry. While in school, they encouraged me to embrace the 20 somethings and learn from them, delight in being with them. I did.

One whose dog died during this time wanted offered to keep my dog during my overnights while I interned as an ICU chaplain. Such a gift for everyone. At 5:30 on a cold February morning, I met a man, while walking the dog, who is now my husband.

Where are your water wells?

Whether you are happily single or content in marriage, where do your paths cross with the stranger? The grocery store check-out line? A barber shop? The locker room? The coffee shop where you actually sit rather than dash out?

The places you tend to the needs of your human body might become the place to tend your heart. Never underestimate

God's willingness to show you some aspect of yourself, designed within you, for you...and for the rest of God's creation.

God's plan includes unlikely pairs of boy meets girl, such as Jacob and Rachel, whose courtship escapades could become the blockbuster rom-com. And, God's plan also delights in pairing a couple of fellas or two people who prefer the pronouns "they." When we accept God designed us for love, you and me, we can forget about prescribing who another is to be, or who they should love. We are merely players in God's grand plan. Isn't that the gift?

God gets into the gritty particulars of human life. Thirst. Fear. Hunger. Love. When meeting someone new, wonder what is God offering? I believe God wants us to look at the other with the same passion that God feels when God created us...full of possibility. In the process we might find ourselves ever more loving to God.





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