



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
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Listening As An Act of Love Conversation - With Uncle Laban and With Jesus

Scripture Lessons: John 4:1-29 (selected verses) Friends should share all things in common - Plato, Phaedrus

This morning, a contrast in two conversations: one from the Old Testament, the other from the New. These conversations take a little while, so I'm going to take longer with each Scripture reading, setting up the verses of dialogue I read; I'll then talk about both conversations, and conversation in general, in the sermon.

The first conversation from Genesis chapters 29-31—which is really a series of conversations over 20 years—is between Jacob and his Uncle Laban.

Uncle Laban—he's the kind of guy: you ask him about the weather—you better hold on to your wallet. And you sit down to have a conversation with him? Well, you better get it in all writing, in fact, you better have your lawyer with you—and even that might not be enough.

You may remember how the story begins: Jacob is on the run, running away from home, fleeing the wrath of his his brother Esau. He travels to the estate of his Uncle Laban, where he's never been before, whom he's never met before, and on his way, he stops at a well, where he sees all of his Uncle's livestock being watered, and where he meets his cousin, Rachel. The two fall instantly in love.

When Laban hears of Jacob's arrival, we're told that he runs out to meet Jacob; embraces him, kisses him, and brings him to his house. "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" Laban says to Jacob.

Seems like a good start. And since it's clear that Jacob is going to be staying with his Uncle for a while—working for him a while—well, there's the whole question of compensation. Laban, in fact, brings it up. He says to Jacob, "Surely, you are my kinsman, but that doesn't mean you should serve me for nothing!"

In other words, "Go ahead: Name your wages!" For someone in Jacob's desperate situation—he has nowhere else to go—and remember he's in love with Laban's younger daughter—this sounds almost too good to be true.

So Jacob names his wages: "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

Laban responds: "Surely, it is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; so, stay with me."

Did you notice the ambiguity?: Laban said it would indeed be a good thing for Rachel to marry Jacob, but he did NOT agree—not explicitly—to the seven-year part of the contract. Just wait. So Jacob does his seven years of work as caretaker for Laban's estate: and he's good at it, especially with the livestock, which was the main measure of wealth in those

So at the end of seven years, the big day: the wedding celebration. And as the celebration comes to an end, Laban sends not Rachel, but Leah, Rachel's older sister, into Jacob's tent. And Jacob doesn't notice—don't ask why!—until the next morning. Then he's furious. He goes to his Uncle Laban: "Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"

Laban has a ready response: "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the first-born." Just following local custom, you know. Well this is the first time Jacob—or anyone else—has heard of *that*. But before Jacob can say anything else, Laban is quick with another offer: "Complete another seven years for me, and then you will marry Rachel."

So Jacob works for Laban for another seven years—and this time he does marry Rachel. And soon enough, Jacob not only has two wives—Leah and Rachel—each with her own maid, but also a growing family. And he's done well for Laban—very well. So he says to Laban: "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know very well the service I have given you."

And once again, Laban is all smiles and agreement; he even brings God into it. He says:

"If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you; name your wages, and I will give it."

If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you—yeah, right. You don't need any divination to count your livestock, your crops, and your money—if you will allow me to say so.

And as for "Name your wages, and I will give it" well, Jacob has heard *that* before. So this time, no ambiguity. He's going to make it clear-cut: black and white. Half of Laban's livestock is spotted and speckled; the other half, all-white. So Jacob, says, "Tomorrow, tomorrow morning, I will divide the lambs and the goats taking the speckled and spotted ones, and leaving you the all-white ones—50/50, that way we'll both see that it's fair."

Well and good. Except that night, Laban sneaks around and takes all the spotted and speckled lamb and goats—takes them away and hides them. They were still his after all—the deal didn't go into effect until the next morning. So when Jacob wakes up he sees nothing but all-white livestock, all of it belonging to Laban!

So Jacob works for Laban for several more years, and, thanks to some ingenious selective breeding as well as God's blessing, Jacob again has several large flocks of spotted and speckled livestock. This time God intervenes: no more talking to Laban! The angel of the Lord appears to Jacob in a dream—telling him to go, go now, get all his family, and get everything—his camels, his donkeys, and his livestock—everything—and get going, now!—while Laban is still away. When Jacob tells Rachel and Leah of the dream, they are more than ready to go. They say to him:

"Is there anything left for us in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, he has used up our money. All the property that God has taken away from our father and given to you belongs you and to us and to our children; do whatever God has said to you."

No love lost here. In fact, on their way out, Rachel goes so far as to steal the household gods of her father, which is like after you've taken everything of value that's not nailed down, you take all the family heirlooms to boot!

So when Laban gets back, of course he goes after them. And when he catches up to them, he confronts Jacob saying (Genesis 31:26-28), "What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. Why did you flee secretly and deceive me and not tell me? I would have sent you away with my blessing, with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre."

He's still Laban.

The second conversation—very different from the first—is between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Jesus is on the road, traveling through Samaria. It's noontime. He's alone—his disciples have gone off to buy food. He's sitting by a well—Jacob's well—he's hot, tired and thirsty.

In the first conversation, the one between Jacob and Laban, words were tools—weapons, really—of dishonesty and deception, scheming and self-seeking, manipulation and exploitation; ultimately, the conversation moved towards—or rather, degenerated into—distrust and distance, division, contempt, and separation. In this conversation, however, the one between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, words are a means—agents, really—of honesty and truth, and self-revelation and self-giving; ultimately the conversation moves towards trust and intimacy, understanding, reconciliation, and communion. Keep those differences in mind, as I read from John's Gospel, Chapter 4 verses 1-29:

A Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well. Jesus says to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman responds, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of *Samaria*?"

So it begins with an ancient division: the hatred between Samaritans and Jews was long-standing—going back more than 700 years—and it was both political and religious. The Jews saw the Samaritans as apostates (they had abandoned the true faith) and traitors (on more than one occasion, they had sided with Israel's enemies). Therefore, Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans, they wouldn't even speak to them; hence the woman's question.

But rather than adhere to that division or even acknowledge it, Jesus takes the first step towards communion: the first step towards self-revelation and self-giving. He says: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

And the woman is honest enough to say I don't get it: I don't understand: what is this "living water" you're talking about? How do you get it? And who—what—are *you*? She says, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well?"

Jesus answers: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

This answer, while still mysterious, does tell her more about both the water and Jesus: this "living" water gives eternal life, and Jesus, bucket or no, is its source

The woman obviously doesn't fully understand, but she understands and trusts enough to ask Jesus: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

But now Jesus puts *her* to the test: "Go, call your husband, and come back."

The woman answers him, "I have no husband."

A step towards honesty, not complete honesty, but a step.

Jesus says to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

By the way, I don't think Jesus is judging the woman for her five husbands here—others have thought so, but I don't. At the very least, he seems to be emphasizing not the woman's life and character, but his own. He's saying: "this is who I am—I am the one who knows you."

And this is reflected in the woman's response: "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

A prophet of course is someone with special God-given insight, especially into the human heart. But a prophet is also someone who brings the word of God to people in order to bring people to God. And this raises the question of where you find God, which again raises the question of the religious differences between Jews and Samaritans. The woman says to Jesus:

"Our ancestors [she's referring to the Jews and Samaritans of centuries ago] *Our* ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you [that is, the Jews of the past seven centuries, as well as those of Jesus' day] *you* say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

But for Jesus, it's no longer a matter of *where* you worship but of *how* you worship. The time has now come. Jesus says to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The woman listens to Jesus, and she knows this much: For us to know and love God, for us to worship God in spirit and truth—this must be the work of not just a prophet but of the Messiah.

So she says to Jesus, "I know that the Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

And now the final revelation, the final act of self-giving, the final movement towards trust and intimacy, understanding and communion. Jesus says to her: "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Honesty and truth, self-revelation and self-giving; ultimately moving towards trust and intimacy, understanding, reconciliation, and communion.

And so when the disciples come back, the woman leaves her water jar and goes back to the city, saying to anyone and everyone (John 4:29): "Come and see a man who told me *everything* I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

My hunch is we've all had conversations like those between Jacob and his Uncle Laban—I know I have.

And I also guess that you've had conversations like those between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Not nearly as many, but once you've had one, you don't forget it—I know I haven't.

What I want to say today is that Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman is a microcosm of his earthly ministry, a picture of how Jesus comes to us in the flesh, a model of how God speaks to us—even today. Which is difficult for us, because we're much more used to conversations like those between Jacob and Laban.

For the past two weeks, I've been preaching on "Listening as an Act of Love." Two weeks ago, I said that God is listening—God does listen—to us. Jesus' life, death and resurrection assures us of that, even though at times it doesn't always seem like it. But we can experience God listening to us when we listen—really listen—to one another.

And last week, I said that we *can* really listen, although it's difficult for us. And we can even listen to God; and such listening heals us, helps us to listen better. At the end of last week's sermon, I even invited you to listen to God speaking to you here and now.

But listening by itself—at least in the minimal sense—is not enough. Laban, for example, listens very closely: he listens for vulnerability and weakness, an opening, an opportunity to use words to get what he wants. For him, words are tools, weapons. No, listening by itself is not enough; love is also needed. Love is what we must bring to the conversation if it is to be true, and far more than that, love must be the overall movement and end of the conversation, if we are to be true. In true conversation, words are the means—the agents—of love.

The angel that comes to Jacob in the dream gives the best advice for dealing with the Uncle Labans of the world: get out! Run away—as fast and as far as you possibly can!! The problem is that we can't always do that. As with Jacob, so with us: circumstances, obligations, even love, sometimes prevent it. Jacob worked for his uncle for twenty years—it wasn't easy to get away. And it's even more difficult to get away from the Uncle Laban inside us—and there is at least a little Uncle Laban inside all of us.

Once you've been hurt by the world—by the Uncle Labans of the world—it's tempting to become an Uncle Laban yourself. Maybe not in every sphere, at least not at first. But in *this* sphere or *that* sphere—precisely in those spheres where you were hurt—on the playground or in school, in business or in politics, on-line or on Twitter, or even in love or in what passes for love.

The problem in trying to limit such behavior to one sphere and not another, one time and not another, one person and not another, is that Uncle Laban wants everything—starting and ending with your soul. “Words,” Socrates said, “lead the soul—for better and for worse.” Thus, the Laban inside us grows, degenerating into division, contempt, and separation. Just look at how Jacob, Rachel, and Leah finally part ways with Laban—could there be anything worse for a family, anything less like a family? And still there's Laban: schmoozing and lying to the very end: “I would have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre.” It would be funny, if it weren't so pathetic, and so pathetically familiar.

But words can also lead the soul for the better. Conversations—true conversation—can be healing. Look at how Jesus and the Samaritan woman part ways: she not only sees who and what Jesus is, but is also willing to share that with others. She becomes one of the first evangelists: bringing the good news of the Messiah to others and thus bringing others to Jesus: “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

She phrases it as a question—she doesn't quite yet believe fully—but it as a question that seeks affirmation. She's on her way to believing, on her way to understanding, reconciliation, and communion. Conversation has done its work: that is, healing. And it continues to do it, as she spreads the good news.

Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook* calls these healing conversations, “Gospel conversations.” *Not* “conversations *about* the Gospel”: we can be dishonest and deceptive, scheming and self-seeking, manipulative and exploitative, in conversations about the Gospel, which is why so many people run away when anyone quotes the Bible. But she calls them, “Gospel Conversations.” Gospel Conversations, Duffield writes, “by definition entail grace, mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation.” So why do we seem to have so few Gospel Conversations today, especially in our public life?

Duffield has an answer: these days, “there are many in our culture who are much more interested in winning.”

There’s at least a little Laban in all of us, and nowadays maybe more than a little. Our conversations seem to be degenerating more and more into distrust and distance, division, contempt, and separation. If you don’t believe me, check your twitter feed—or better yet, don’t; have a real conversation with someone instead.

As Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well. As Jesus did with everyone he met. To say that Jesus had a gift with words is a ridiculous understatement. And yet he never used them as tools or weapons. Even with the Pharisees: he avoids their word-traps, parries their verbal assaults, frustrates their schemes in ways that are rhetorically breathtaking. When they try to trick him with the question about paying taxes, he asks “Show me a coin—whose picture is on it?” . . . “Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And then he tosses the coin back to them with a look that asks, “Have you given to God what is God’s, namely your whole selves, or do you use religion and God only as a way to serve yourself? Even with the Pharisees, he speaks in love—tough love, yes, but love all the same; he speaks for their betterment that they might turn and be healed. His words are the means—the agents—of love.

Even his silence speaks in love. As he stands before Pontius Pilate, abandoned, beaten, whipped, spat upon, and facing crucifixion, when Pilate looks up at him and asks, “What is truth?”—Pilate’s complete disregard for truth—this contemptuous dismissal of the very idea, the very existence of truth—this being the last desperate cry of the corrupted soul, as it is also of the corrupted culture (witness the politics of our day)—even *then* Jesus speaks in love as he answers Pilate with silence.

Jesus silence says this: “Pilate, listen to yourself: you can’t possibly believe this, you can’t. Listen to the echo of your own words, listen to the echo of your own heart.”

But Pilate can’t listen. He gets up, leaves the room, and goes off to please the crowd—as those who have nothing but contempt for the truth so often do. And so truth goes to die on a cross. Even Jesus’ silence speaks in love.

And his love speaks to us. He speaks to us in love. Listen. Put aside the Laban’s of the world, and the Labans inside you, and listen. Put yourself in the shoes of the Samaritan woman, and listen.

“All those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

He is the Messiah—the one who is called Christ.

“It is he, he is the one who is speaking to you.”

So listen: the conversation has already begun.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

