

Bible Study
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12, Year A
July 30, 2017

[RCL] Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Genesis 29:15-28

Jacob was no stranger to deceit, having orchestrated enough of it against his twin brother Esau. Now, the father of his beloved Rachel turns the tables on him, switching out one daughter for the other on the night Jacob expects to consummate a marriage with Rachel. One especially interesting twist to the story is when Laban chides Jacob, saying, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn.” It’s as if God is reminding Jacob of his own scheme to displace his older brother’s birthright.

It’s difficult to sympathize with Jacob’s indignation at having been tricked, given his own history of similar behavior, however over the course of the Jacob story, it is illuminating to see that his mother and his uncle Laban manipulated Jacob just as deceitfully. He has come from a family of “players,” but God can still work with him, imperfect as he is. This is important because it affirms that even when we disappoint God, the promises that God has made will still be kept.

- Can you think of an example in your own life where someone has done something to hurt you, and sometime later, you find yourself doing the same thing?
- In what ways do you observe God blessing someone into greater holiness, just by being the God of faithfulness?
- We read that Jacob’s seven years of toil “seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for [Rachel].” What does this teach us about the power of love?

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b

What a terrific testament to the steadfast love of God. Speaking of “the promise he made for a thousand generations.” The psalmist is singing to the descendants of Jacob/Israel, reminding them, that God’s judgments prevail in all the world.” In times when it seems like it is evil that actually prevails, it’s important to remember that the laws of nature that God has set in motion ultimately prevail, whether or not the human sense of time demands an immediate and particular response to prayer. In particular, when the psalm reminds us to “continually seek [God’s] face, I can imagine God at work, slowly building a great chain of mountains, unobservable over the lifespan of humans, yet profound and triumphant over geologic time scales.

I am reminded of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s poem *Trust in the Slow Work of God*. A scholar priest, his perspective as a paleontologist gave Teilhard de Chardin the skill to take the long view. I imagine that he understood the slow process of God fashioning Jacob and God’s other agents of change into the leaders he needed them to be at whatever pace their growth required.

- It seems as though the Bible (both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) is full of stories of imperfect heroes. What does their evolution into God’s agents of change teach us?
- How do you respond when God seems to be slow to answer a prayer?

Romans 8:26-39

There is hardly anything that can be said that is more comforting than the assurance that “there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul thought that the world would end soon, and wrote from that context. He was surrounded by Roman occupation and its associated violence and exploitation. Even so, he understood that God’s purposes would still be achieved even in the face of significant challenge. It is a hauntingly familiar refrain that so many generations despair of the evil around them, as we do today. Yet Paul tells the believers in the early church at Rome that they are more, or better than the conquerors through Jesus. That message applies to believers now, assuring us that we must stay the course of following Jesus, because we can be more than those who conquer to impose their will with violence.

- When Paul writes “all things work together for good for those who love God,” what does that mean? Do you believe this?
- If nothing can separate us from the love of God, why do we sometimes feel estranged from God? Why might we perceive ourselves to be separated from God’s love?

Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven using parables. It’s important that he does not describe it directly, but rather by what it is like. This is somewhat reminiscent of the method we use to look at the sun—we cannot look directly at it, but we can view it through filters that protect the eye from its brightness. Perhaps the kingdom of heaven is so bright, we can only approach it obliquely until we put on the protection of our relationship with Jesus—God incarnate in human form that does not blind us?

In the parable of the net and fish of every kind, verse 50 is disturbing in its imagery of the “furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” It is important to consider that it is evil that will be refined in this fire—transformed. While the language is violent, the point is that no evil will follow us into the kingdom of heaven.

- Why do you think Jesus speaks indirectly about the kingdom of heaven? In verses 34-35, omitted from Proper 12, Matthew explains that Jesus spoke only in parables to fulfill a prophecy. Does this affect your understanding of the kingdom of heaven?
- How would you describe the kingdom of heaven in contemporary terms?

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