

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 29:15-28, Psalm 105, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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July 27, 2014

Last week, you'll remember, Jacob and his mother conspired together to steal the paternal blessing which belonged to Jacob's older brother, Esau. Fearing Esau's wrath, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban's home in faraway Haran. Today in Genesis Chapter 29, we're told that Laban has two daughters – Leah, the elder, and Rachel, the younger.

This translation says Leah's eyes were lovely, whereas in all other translations, we are told her eyes are "weak" or unattractive. Rachel on the other hand is graceful and beautiful. Rachel is so desirable, in fact, that Jacob agrees to serve his uncle for seven years to have her as his wife.

When the wedding day finally arrives, we can imagine Jacob's excitement after the very long engagement period. However, Laban has a trick up his sleeve and exchanges his older daughter, Leah, for Jacob's true love. At last the tables are turned on Jacob, the deceiver, as he himself gets taken.

Laban explains the tradition guiding younger and older daughters and marriage. Jacob knew all too well the traditions of older and younger sons. He got around that tradition once but not this time. He can have Rachel for a second wife after the week of wedding festivities with Leah is over. And he will have to serve his uncle an additional seven years.

We might conclude that what goes around comes around. Rarely do we get away with a trespass without having to suffer the consequences one way or another. I can imagine the Jews telling these early stories of Jacob, one of their patriarchs, around a campfire, and having a good old belly laugh at his misadventures. We hope they also decided not to be mischievous like Jacob. We shouldn't either.

Next week Jacob will suffer a more serious price for his trickery. Stay tuned.

It's pretty remarkable what got included in Holy Writ, and what kind of people are God's chosen ones.

The author of Matthew's gospel strings five short parables of Jesus together for us this morning. In the first two, the Kingdom of God is compared to small, nearly invisible, quite common substances – a mustard seed and yeast. Interestingly, the mustard seed could grow to a sizeable shrub-like tree large enough to shelter birds. The measure of

yeast mentioned could produce dozens of loaves of bread. Seeds and yeast are pretty powerful, then, in spite of their initial size, and they seem to do their work of growing and expanding without too much human effort.

We can surmise, then, that the Kingdom of God starts small. Jesus, the Son of God, started small as an infant. His ministry started small, and he was a relative unknown from a backwater village. He never left the tiny country of Palestine. A small band of disciples would assume the mantle of leadership shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection. Yet, within a couple of generations this new faith called Christianity would spread throughout the region around the Mediterranean Sea. Less than 300 hundred years after its small beginnings, Christianity would become the official religion for the entire Roman Empire replacing thousands of years of pagan worship.

Small beginnings but amazing, miraculous growth! Why the appeal? Why the rapid expansion? We might say in large part because the Kingdom of God and its adherents, like the mustard tree, welcomed any and all to share a branch and find cover, care, welcome and a place to belong.

They also shared bread made from yeast. People were fed with communion bread, the bread of life that nourishes the soul, and bread that fills the stomach. For Jesus, sharing a meal with the rich, the poor, the saint, or the sinner was central to his ministry and message that the Kingdom of God was all inclusive.

Grace church started small with a few people from St. Paul's and a few hundred dollars. Two small meeting places somewhere downtown couldn't support a growing congregation, so a large church on High Street was constructed. Every ministry starts small and God grows it. Martha Merritt is a woman who began years ago devoting her life to helping the hungry in Petersburg. Now others join her efforts. Yesterday 12 of our youth restocked Martha's food shelves. Homes and lives are being restored in Crisfield, Maryland, because small groups like ours are showing up for a week at a time to help them rebuild. If we are willing, God will build it. Even small donations in the Thanksgiving envelopes we fill each fourth Sunday make a difference.

You might think that your being here this morning and most Sundays is a small thing, but it makes a considerable difference. You are a good example, a witness to your friends and family and members who don't go to church that your faith and regular worship adds meaning to your life, making you a happier and better person. Visitors on Sunday see us and think, "What a neat bunch of people. I'd like to get to know them and let them get to know me." Cars filling the parking lot tell passersby that there is

something important going on in here. Maybe next week they will stop and see for themselves.

In the second two parables, the Kingdom of God is compared to something of great value – a treasure and a pearl. The treasure is found while the pearl is searched for. Both bring great joy to the recipients. The kingdom of God is the highest prize if the man and the merchant sell everything else they have to obtain it.

There aren't too many things we would give up everything for, are there? Maybe our spouse, our children, or our pets? Where would our faith rank or our church family? My greatest joys have been the two times I fell in love with a woman and she with me, the day I was first surprisingly filled to overflowing with the love of God, and the births of my two sons. That kind of joy is priceless for sure. One can't stay in that kind of joy for long and function very well.

Claire said in Bible study Wednesday that she recognizes the Kingdom of God in her daily life most profoundly when she receives the unconditional love of her grandchildren. "Gran, Gran!" They say all excited when they see her. Is that not a clue to exactly what the treasure hidden in the field or the pearl of great price is? Is it not the unconditional love of God? When we experience it, it is beyond belief. But we immediately think I am not worthy, I am not acceptable, I am not faithful enough or devout enough. I have so many flaws, we say, and it is true.

None of that matters for now. All of that can be taken into account later but, first and foremost, God loves you and me absolutely and completely, at this moment, and in every moment. Until we believe that and accept it, we can't fully live the abundant life Jesus promises us. We can't begin to enter and enjoy the priceless Kingdom of God.

This Kingdom can't be bought like a field or a pearl. It's not for sale. We can freely have it. The only way to keep it, however, is to give it away over and over again. A new sort of joy comes from sharing it as far and wide as possible.

The cost of obtaining the Kingdom is placing ourselves wholly and fully in God's hands, trusting that we are loved beyond measure in spite of our shortcomings. If participation in the Kingdom of God involves readily receiving and giving away that divine, unconditional love, then without it we are an undesirable fish flipping and flopping desperately alone on the ground (a reference to the final parable for today).

No one wants to be an undesirable fish flipping and flopping alone on the ground. Invite the fresh, forgiving love of God to rush through your gills and fill your heart to overflowing. AMEN.