

## Proper 12 Year A July 30, 2023

Jacob is a scoundrel. He has cheated his older brother Esau out of his lawful inheritance twice. Esau foolishly traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. The second time Jacob, in connivance with Rachael uses a ruse to con his old blind father into giving him the blessing thus making him heir instead of Esau. Esau threatened to kill Jacob. Rebecca sent Jacob away to her relatives in Haran to get a wife for himself.

In Haran Jacob meets his match his conniving uncle Laban. Laban has two daughters, Leah the eldest and Rachael the younger. Jacob falls in love with Rachael and agrees to work for Laban for seven years for her hand in marriage. But Laban is a shrewd man. He wants both his daughters married off. Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob. After seven years, Laban's a wedding feast and substitutes Leah for Rachael. In the morning it's Jacob's turn to feel cheated. Laban gives Jacob a lame excuse for his behavior. As my friend Debbie Carbino used to say, "What goes around comes around". Jacob agrees to work for him for seven more years in order to marry Rachael. Out of the deception will come a rivalry between the two wives and the beginnings of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Here we have two dysfunctional families, one in Caanan and one in Haran. The writer of Genesis could have painted a rosy, idyllic picture of Israel's origins. Instead, he depicts sharp deep levels of intrafamilial conflict and deception. But notice, human love and human service counter-balance selfish actions and less than honest motives. Out of all this mess God is affecting his Divine purpose in the creation of a great nation as he promised Abraham. To quote the New Interpreters' Bible "the author places the birth of Israel as a community of faith within an admixture of familial conflict, human love and service and ongoing Divine blessing in the midst of failure. We as a community of faith are fortunate in having a God who does not insist on perfection before choosing to work in and through it.

Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome was written to a church he had not founded. He begins in Chapter 8, verse 26 by speaking about prayer. He says we do not know what we should pray. Why? Because we cannot know what the future holds. I know when I pray for myself it's hard to know what is best for me. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. Our spirit speaks directly to the Spirit of God. Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us. I think the best way to pray for myself and others is to present our needs to God and know that God knows them and loves them more than I ever could.

Paul also tells us that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. If we reflect on our lives, we can see some times which were difficult, which we thought were a disaster. In hindsight it becomes clearer that God was turning evil into good for our benefit. God gave us the strength we needed so that misfortune can be used for our growth.

In view of all this, Paul asserts that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. He goes on to list everything imaginable in heaven or on earth: death, life, peril, hardship, persecution. None of these things or anything else in creation can separate God's love from us.

Paul says if God is for us who can be against us. We know this because God gave up his only son for all of us. I can't think of anything more comforting than that.

In our Gospel reading from St. Matthew, Jesus of the Kingdom of Heaven making comparisons to it by using quite ordinary things.

The first two parables are about something small growing into something large. The mustard seed referenced is a tiny black seed used for instance, in Indian cooking. It becomes not a tree but a large shrub. The Kingdom of Heaven starts small but grows to be large and useful. The point is that you have to plant it to get this result.

Yeast is a tiny bit of dough left over from a previous batch – like in sourdough rye bread. The yeast is an animal eats the flour making a gas which expands thus leavening the flour and making it fit for making bread. If you do not leaven the flour the result is a cracker like matzos. Before The Passover in observant Jewish's home there is a ritual in the house to sweep away all remaining leaven. For 7 days the Kosher house will only have unleavened bread. By the way the usual way Israelites thought of leaven was that it was sin a little was corrupting – like idol worship. Jesus has given leaven a positive spin. It's hard to think about things in a new way when you are of your old concepts.

The next two comparisons liken the Kingdom of Heaven to something of surpassing value: something worth giving everything you own to obtain it.

In the first parable a man is doing his regular plowing. When he suddenly discovers buried treasure. During war time in Israel some people would bury their valuables in the ground so they could recover them later. This man sold everything he had to obtain this field. Jesus is not encouraging to cheat the owner of the field. He is simply indicating how valuable the Kingdom of Heaven is.

In the parable about the pearl of great price, the merchant likewise sold all that he had and bought that pearl. The merchant was actively searching for fine pearls when he found this particularly valuable one. The Kingdom of Heaven is worth giving up what we think is important and risking it all.

In the last parable the Kingdom of Heaven is likened to a fishing net: the kind used on trawlers. This net ensnares every kind of fish and other living things within reach. It's a very indiscriminate way to fish. This is what the disciples were doing when Jesus called them. Note that it is not the fishermen who separate the good from the bad – it is angels at the end of the age. It's not up to us to judge who gets into the Kingdom. It's much bigger than we imagine. God casts a wide net.

So what is the Kingdom of Heaven like? First of all it starts out small but grows to be large. We may never know what our seeds of kindness may grow into.

Secondly, the Kingdom of Heaven is more precious than anything else in the world. It's worth giving away all we have and are to obtain it.

Last but not least, it is far more expansive than we know.