

Sermon – The Kingdom of God

Sunday, July 26, 2020

Scripture Readings – Genesis 29:15-28, Matthew 13:31-34, 44-46

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Our first Scripture reading is Genesis 29:15-28. Last Sunday we checked our spiritual compass in the story of Yahweh coming in a dream to Jacob, the fugitive on the run to live with his mother's brother Laban, after tricking his older brother Esau, and their father Isaac, into giving him the birthright and blessing that culture mandated to the oldest son. Our reading today continues Jacob's story when he becomes the victim of his uncle's trickery, who requests that Jacob honor a similar cultural mandate that the older daughter is given in marriage before the younger. The number seven symbolizes completion and during these years of toil, Jacob grows in character, wisdom and faith. Hear now the word of God.

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were lovely and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹ Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. ²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. ²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵ When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" ²⁶ Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸ Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. Amen.

Our second reading, Matthew 13:31-34, 44-46, continues the teaching of Christ on the kingdom of God. Using parables, Christ reveals the mystery of God's presence in our midst, the small beginnings and hidden ways of God's kingdom transforming people's lives and communities of faith. This is the word of God.

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

⁴⁴ "The kingdom of God is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of God is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Amen.

The title of the sermon – The Kingdom of God

The text: “The kingdom of God is like...” Matthew 13:33a

Let us pray: Loving God, we thank you for the mystery of your kingdom in our midst and we pray that by your grace we may become a part of it. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The kingdom of God is like... *yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.* What is Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God in this parable?

Those of us that bake bread understand that without the leaven, without the yeast, the bread does not rise. How the yeast makes the bread rise is a mystery, it is also something that takes time. The flour mixed with the leaven and kneaded sits and after an hour or so, the dough will rise on its own, without our assistance. For Jesus—this ordinary, everyday event of rising bread sheds light on the beauty of God working in our lives. The grace of God within us is a gift and over time we are given the strength to rise to the occasions life presents. By the leaven, by the grace of God, we can live lives that are nourishing and sustaining within the kingdom of God. A small amount of starter dough mixed with yeast is sometimes known as “the mother sponge.” It is not uncommon for a baker’s starter dough to have years of history, from many hundreds of previous batches continuing the rich tradition of bread rising.

All of God’s children need a little yeast to rise to the occasions life presents. Surely Jacob was in need of an extra measure of God’s grace as he found himself tricked by his father-in-law on that long-anticipated wedding night after laboring seven years to marry Laban’s younger daughter Rachel. In keeping with the subject matter at hand, we are not going to explore the practical details of this story like how it is that Jacob did not recognize his bride before the morning. Neither are we going to enter into a discussion on the merits and flaws of the marriage customs in this ancient patriarchal culture.

Instead, let us hold fast to the irony within the story, or what some would call poetic justice, in the “trickster being tricked.” Let us delight for a moment in the old saying, “What goes around comes around!” And let us pause to reflect on the meaning of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ poignant quote, “A man’s character is his fate.”

The beauty of this biblical story is that through the circumstances in his life and a combination of fortitude, perseverance and discipline, Jacob grows into a person of a different character. Indeed, all those years of hard work in Laban’s field (7 for Leah, 7 for Rachel, and another 7 for prosperity), a few more restless nights along the way, and necessary losses and personal accountability shaped his being and prepared him to meet his brother Esau again. Jacob rises to the occasion presented to him and by the grace of the loving God with whom he wrestled and who would not let him go, Jacob eventually grows into the person God intended.

All of God’s children need a little yeast to rise to the occasions life presents them. Presbyterian pastor and educator George E. Conway talks about this in his book on parenting called Giving Good Gifts. He describes this yeast as the way we view the world and the values that shape our lives. Rev. Conway affirms the importance of a *transcendent perspective*, which literally means

to be able to look beyond what is in front of us. It allows us to put our present circumstances in the proper perspective... to see things not only from our point of view, but also from another's point of view, and more importantly, from God's perspective! Giving our children this yeast in their lives doesn't mean we have all the answers, rather it means we walk alongside them through the hills and valleys on their faith journeys.

And when those journeys present uninvited detours, complicated circumstances and loss, the yeast that is a part of our lives sustains us in mysterious and powerful ways. Joan Chittister, in her book The Story of Ruth, reminds us that during these times:

We learn, just when we think we have nothing, just when it feels that we have not one good thing left in the world, that what we do still have is ourselves. We have, deep down inside us what no one can take away, what can never be lost either to time or to chance: We have the self that brought us to this point. We have gifts of God in abundance, never noticed, never touched, perhaps, but a breath in us nevertheless and waiting to be tapped. And more, we have whatever we have developed over the years in the center of ourselves—the grit, the hope; the calm; and the irrepressible trust in the providence of God despite the turns of fortune—

Or, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi, chapter 4: *I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret ...I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field.

The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour...

This past Monday, the Steadfast Neighbor Service Week Team gathered in Parish Hall (within CDC guidelines) to review the small projects and repairs we will do in our neighborhood the week of August 10-14. What a delight it was to be together! Over 30 masked familiar faces ranging from age 15 to 78 joined the circle. The team has now grown to almost 50! When those gathered on Monday shared the silver lining in the COVID-19 cloud, many (especially the youth) spoke of how meaningful time with family has been. One never knows what seeds have been planted ...and how the little bit of leaven during this pandemic will shape our character, grow our faith, and deepen our appreciation for one another, this community of faith, and our neighborhood. As we look back on the summer of 2020, one wonders what blessings will grow from this unexpected time.

Whatever life presents each one of us...whatever small seeds we are called to plant, whatever bread we are asked to bake, whatever treasure we discover in the fields of life or pearls we find along the way, let us do so with gratitude, justice, peace and joy, recognizing the mystery and wonder of the kingdom of God and, that by the grace of God, may we become a part of it.) Amen.