

6 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12 – Year A – July 27, 2011 - Homily
Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105: 1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Susan E. Wilmot

Tonight's reading from Genesis is almost irresistible in its humor, trickery, and example of what is, as Fred said on Sunday, a truly dysfunctional family that gives us all hope of redemption and reconciliation. There's even the old adage that "love is blind" to throw into the mix. After seven years of being around Rachel, loving and adoring Rachel, poor Jacob completely fails to recognize that the woman presented as his new bride is Rachel's older sister, Leah. This whole passage is told rather tongue in cheek. For you and I it's a bit like watching Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, full of little tricks and turns, but it all works out in the end. In fact, we cannot neglect to notice that despite human fallibility and significant character flaws in the key players, like Jacob, God works it all out in the end.

From as early as chapter 25 of Genesis, we know two things about Jacob. The first is that he wrestled with his brother Esau in the womb, and was born holding Esau's heel. Later, he tricks Esau into giving up his birthright for the sake of a bowl of stew. In chapter 27, Jacob tricks his aging father, Isaac, into blessing him as though he were the older brother, Esau. So it's clear that Jacob really struggles to honor the traditions and rights of his people when it comes to birthrights. The second thing we know about Jacob is that he's a really tricky character. Sometimes he comes across as being devout and faithful, and at other times he's busy scheming and deceiving in order to get what he wants. Jacob the dubious is about to meet his match in his uncle Laban. Perhaps men of questionable character run in this family, which is, of course, also part of our family of God's children.

Jacob enters into a contract with Laban to serve on the family farm for seven years in order to have Rachel's hand in marriage. Historically and culturally, the key point of this marriage of cousins is keeping it all – land and livestock associated with wealth – within the tribal kinship group. As scary as it seems to us today for women to be treated as commodities, that is simply a fact of life in ancient Israel. The women in this story are the mediating and highly valuable commodities that seal the deal between Laban and Jacob.

We don't know for sure if it was truly a custom that the eldest daughter is married before the youngest. Laban didn't mention such a custom when he and Jacob agreed on the terms of contract for marriage to Rachel. Local customs are always possible, but Laban's deception of Jacob the trickster is probably just that. The story about marrying the firstborn before the younger seems just a little too smooth. But it does make a significant theological point for us all, especially in light of Jacob's lack of respect for honoring traditional birthrights. Jacob has to wait for Rachel. There's no easy fix for getting what he wants immediately. The question we all have to ask ourselves is how often do we try to run an end around God in order to get what we want now, rather than pray for God's will to be done and wait, or just to wait patiently for God to work it out. Trying to outsmart God is usually not a good thing.

While we can admire the humor inherent in this comedy of errors, last minute switches under cover of darkness and under the influence of a large amount of alcohol, as well as the overwhelming lust that means two sisters end up with one husband, there's more to the story than initially meets the eye. Jacob and Laban's deceitful ways set the scene for further family drama and generations of conflict. Nothing new there we might say. Yet there is a lesson for us all to learn from these

ancient ancestors and their family lives. In next Sunday's reading we'll hear more about the story of Jacob wrestling, yet again, this time with an angel of the Lord, before he's reconciled to his brother Esau. It's said that we can choose our friends, but not our family, and judging by how many of us have intra-family conflicts, we'd probably all agree with that. Yet the overwhelming desire and focus of God is always to seek reconciliation, and to be in right relationship with God, with our family, with our friends and with our neighbors. It's one of the challenges hidden in the depths of this humorous story of two tricksters that we cannot ignore, and a lesson that we all need to take to heart.

Later in the story, it turns out that while Leah bears several sons with apparent ease, Jacob's beloved Rachel is unable to conceive a child. Only God can open her womb, so that she finally has children of her own, Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph is apparently chosen by God as the heir of Israel going forward, and has troubles of his own with his older half-brothers. These special births, marked by divine intervention are significant in God's history of salvation, including children born to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and of course, Mary the mother of Jesus. Again, much of what we read about involves waiting on God as our creator, sustainer, redeemer, and provider of all good gifts. As we've been reading in the parables from the Gospel of Matthew patience is a fruit of the Spirit, and something we probably all could use more of!

Last, but not least, perhaps the most important lesson from this reading is truly a gift from God. We begin to see that God works with us all, from the most dubious characters to the most saintly amongst us. As Walter Brueggemann says, "the purpose of God is somehow operative in the places of scandal and deception." We might add that God's purpose is also at work in the people of ambiguous and ambivalent character, like Jacob, and like many of us who call ourselves children of God. Even Martin Luther had a hard time being honest about what is so clear here, and in this week's Gospel story: God's kingdom can grow even from highly inauspicious beginnings and from pretty dodgy people. That's yet another reason for us all to seek and serve God in all persons, without letting our prejudices and biases get in the way. There's plenty for us to think about this week, and plenty for us to work on with God's help in our own spiritual growth. Just like Jacob, we're all works in progress.

Amen.