

11th Week after Pentecost, Proper 12 – Year A – July 30, 2008 Homily
Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Susan E. Wilmot

Treachery and trickery are hardly new in the world. From Biblical history to world history, and fictional characters, there are a number of infamous villains. Some we love, and some we just love to hate. Jacob, Isaac and Rebekah's younger son is one of those tricksters that leave us raising our eyebrows in surprise, but somehow engages our empathy. Jacob's story from the Book of Genesis tells us two important things about God: we don't have to be, nor can we be, perfect in order for God to use us in God's plan; and just in case you didn't already know this, God really has a sense of humor.

Before the passage we read tonight, the story of Jacob goes something like this. In a smooth exchange of food for privilege, Jacob has tricked Esau out of his birthright as the eldest son. And then, in a decidedly devious and villainous manner, prompted by Mom Rebekah, Jacob has also stolen the blessing due to Esau. This particular piece of treachery was accomplished by capitalizing on the fact that Isaac is old and almost blind. Since Rebekah hears that Esau is planning to kill Jacob, she plans to send him away to her brother Laban in order to stay safe, whilst telling Isaac that it would be great to send Jacob to her brother to find a wife from their own kin. Isaac blesses Jacob and sends him off unbeknownst to him fulfilling Rebekah's plan. And you thought the daily TV soap operas were full of twists, turns, and conniving!

We pick up the story with Laban shrewdly engaging Jacob's services as a husbandman to his flocks and trading on the obvious sexual attraction between Jacob and Laban's youngest daughter Rachel to get seven years of service as a bride-price. What Jacob does not know is that he has met his match in Uncle Laban! This really is a nice piece of ironic humor in the story of God's elect. As we heard, poor Jacob gets pretty drunk on the day of his wedding to Rachel, and Uncle Laban pulls a classic bait and switch move, sending to him his oldest daughter Leah instead of Rachel. Perhaps knowing that Jacob will do anything to have Rachel, Laban then asks for another seven years of free labor in exchange for Rachel. The joke is most certainly on Jacob at this point in the story.

I will put aside the obvious horror that any woman would be traded as property, let alone the problems and illegality associated with polygamy in this day and age. That was then, this is now. We cannot change the past, but we are fools if we do not learn from it. The irony in this passage is that the one who was so quick to supplant his older brother and steal his birthright against the traditions and order of his people, is himself caught on the wrong side of a birth order issue. Whatever Laban's ulterior motives are in terms of free, guaranteed labor, Laban does at least honor his oldest daughter's birthright ensuring that she is married ahead of her younger sibling. Sadly, that arrangement is not great. Poor Leah has the exclusive attention of her husband for only one week, before her sister is married to him as well and the conflict is scaled up dramatically.

In the matter of relationships the tensions are present from the beginning of time. Jacob's cry of "what is this that you have done to me?" echoes God's voice in Genesis 3 asking Eve why she ate from the forbidden tree. In yet another nibble of irony, Eve's response was that the serpent tricked her. Abram too was not above a little bending of the truth, when he tried to protect his own life by asking Sarai to call herself his sister instead of his wife in their travels through Egypt to the Promised Land. The Pharaoh asks Abram the very same question – "what is this that you have done to me?" – when his house is afflicted with great plagues because of taking Sarai. This is yet another tricky move in the history of God's rather imperfect people.

From a promising beginning Laban and Jacob's relationship is now on the downturn, as we will hear in future readings. There are more shenanigans to come, and not just from the men in this story, but from Rachel's deception of her father Laban as well. Later this web of deceit extends to the conflict between the sons of Leah and Rachel's oldest son Joseph. For our part, we can read the Scriptures and judge the characters of the Bible quite easily. Or we can hear stories about our friends, family and neighbors and begin to compare our own lives with theirs. Or we can simply read or hear and learn. After all, as Paul reminds us

in the reading from Romans, if God is for Jacob, Leah and Rachel, our family and neighbors we cannot be against them, whatever sense of self-righteousness their stories stir in us. And who can bring any charge against God's elect – it is God who justifies? Who am I to condemn anyone else? Neither you nor I stand in the place of God. Nothing and no one separates us Jacob and Rachel and Leah from the love of God. Not even the obvious flaws in their characters and personalities prevent God from working His purpose through them. Nothing and no one separates you and me from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Even the cracks and imperfections in our characters and personalities do not prevent God from loving us and using us for His good purpose in as much as we are willing to offer ourselves God's service.

One main lesson that we must all come to learn in this life is that we are not in some kind of holiness competition with one another. If we have our eyes focused on looking better than our neighbor, then we need to refocus our gaze on God. If we don't or can't, then all we are doing is feeding our sense of self-righteousness, which has got very little to do with God's perception of being in right relationship. Here's what Jesus has to say about the self-righteous from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 18:14b): "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." In the matter of relationship God's first commandment is to love God; closely followed by the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are not called to envy, judge, condemn or pit ourselves in some kind of competition against others.

At the heart of the commandment is God's love, and our call to reflect God's love in the world in imitation of Christ Jesus our Lord. According to author Richard Braunstein, "The difference between 'duty' and 'love' is that the first represents Sinai and the second represents Calvary." Jacob has his own twist on duty – bending the Law to suit his own objectives. He literally follows his own path to a future that God promised to give him in God's way. As something of a lesson in humility for Jacob, God's use of Jacob's conniving Uncle Laban is filled with irony and also an object lesson for you and me, to always put our own trust and faith in God alone and not our own efforts. As it turns out, it is Jacob's love for Rachel that binds him to the kind of humble service that bound Jesus to the cross in His great love for all humanity.

Our closing thought for this evening can be summed up in the well known phrase "crime doesn't pay". From Psalm 9, we read this, "The LORD has made himself known, he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands." Once again, it's a done deal. God is in control.

Amen.