

**July 30, 2017 – Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**“The God Who Never Gives Up On Us”**  
**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis**  
**Genesis 29:15-28 (The Message); Romans 8:26-39**

Last week, my colleague Santina, began what will become a three-part series on the life of Jacob – a pivotal character in the first book of the bible – the book of Genesis. If you were present last Sunday, you already know that Jacob was not the most upstanding character we could have chosen for our focus. Jacob is not **JUST** the innocent son of Isaac who goes on to meet and fall in love with the beautiful Rachel. He is not **ONLY** the dutiful son-in-law of Laban, who cares for his flock for over 20 years. He is not **SOLELY** the repentant brother of Esau seeking forgiveness for his indiscretions. No. There is much more to this man that we too often overlook because to embrace the entire story presents a theological problem – the problem of where is the justice of God when someone seems so conniving and unrepentant? Or why do the bad guys seem to get away with so much while the good guys are cheated or victimized?

Jacob, you may remember, is the one who (along with the devious plot carried out by him and his mother) cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright – that which rightfully belonged to Esau because he was the first-born. Moreover, he also cheated him out of his father’s blessing – the bestowal of which was necessary to maintain his status as head of the family upon the death of his father. Once the blessing was given, it could never be taken back. In the end Esau essentially got nothing.

It’s a fascinating story that I’ll leave for your reading. I’ve even included a graphic illustration in your bulletin to follow the family line which can get very confusing. But it’s a tragic story of deception which resulted in Jacob getting all the marbles and then high-tailing it out of town so as not to be captured and punished by his brother.

Forced to leave his homeland, Jacob makes his way to Haran – the land of his mother’s brother Laban. Uncle Laban had settled nicely into this “foreign land” adopting the gods of the locals while continuing to worship Yahweh – the God of his ancestors. Laban had flocks and land, and, at least, two daughters the younger of which Jacob met at the watering hole as he made his way toward the family farm. Rachel was beautiful and Jacob was immediately smitten by her vowing to acquire her as his wife.

When he spoke to her, he realized that she was one of Laban’s daughters who greeted him with open arms. This is where we pick up the story. Shortly afterward, Jacob becomes a hired servant of Laban. Laban insists that he should be paid handsomely for his service and offers him whatever he wants. Here’s where it gets interesting.

Leah (Laban’s other daughter) was the firstborn and should have been the first in line to be married. While the Hebrew adjectives are little unclear regarding her, what is clear is that Jacob is not as taken by Leah’s appearance. In fact, the case could be made that

Leah was not all that attractive. So, Jacob asks for Rachel to be his wife. Laban consents, but only if Jacob agrees to work for seven years. This seems a small price to pay for the reward to receive the hand of Rachel.

Now, here's where it gets really interesting.

On the night of the long-awaited wedding, Laban tricks Jacob. We can surmise that Jacob gets himself rip-roaring drunk before entering the wedding tent to consummate his marriage to Rachel. But the "trickster is tricked." Laban switches his daughters and Jacob sleeps with Leah instead of Rachel. When he awakes the next day, well let's just say he had more than a headache!

Furious, he confronts Laban, "How could you have done this to me? Why did you cheat me out of what I deserved?" Hmmmmm – words that should have sounded very familiar to Jacob as he did the same thing to his brother – Esau.

Now some might call this "karma." Others might refer to it as "just desserts." And still others may even be tempted to see the hand of God in this and deem it fitting punishment, but be careful. As soon as we go there we can just as quickly site example after example of good folks who seem to get similar punishments for no apparent reason.

Let's think about this for a moment. The logic – the fairness – any sense of justice seems to be lacking. So what do we do with a story like this? Where is God in this "hot mess?"

In frustration, one of my faithful lectionary bible study participants said the other day while discussing this passage, "Why do we read these Old Testament stories? I don't see any gospel here."

I fully understand the frustration. Do you think these stories are in the bible to point us in any specific direction? Can they offer us any instruction or relevant application for our lives today? Or do they hold no meaning for us in light of our New Testament "fuller revelation" and teachings?

Remember, these were the stories that Jesus was reared on. These were the stories he was told as a child and likely memorized and thought a lot about as he began to formulate his own parables and growing sense of who his Abba – "Heavenly Father" was and how God related to all creation. Given that, we may see something much deeper going on here. Maybe some of Paul's thoughts in Romans 8 will help us understand.

This beautiful passage is one that provides an important theological truth on the ways of God in our lives – back in the time of Jacob and Esau, in the time of Jesus, even in our day. Initially, describing the weakness that we all face as human beings, Paul reminds us that we all eventually get to this point of frustration and anger – precisely where

Jacob finds himself at this point in his life. We may even be so angry that we can't put it in words. Our thoughts are garbled – even so our prayers may reflect the same frustration with sighs and groanings too deep for words, resulting in the Spirit interceding on our behalf. But then Paul asserts two truths that we have to cling to especially when all seems hopeless:

1. We know that all things work together for good – because God is always with us.

And

2. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In short, we worship “The God who never gives up on us.” It's a reality that Jacob was only beginning to understand. A fact that will become even clearer when we read further in the story next week.

What happens is not karma, or just desserts, and not the justice of God meted out in the form of punishment. No, what we see in this story are the consequences of devious human behavior. Deception begets deception, trickery begets trickery. And sometimes that old saying, “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive,” comes to life in haunting ways.

If you read on, it only gets worse. Jacob works another seven years to gain Rachel, but then he leaves – rather suddenly – under the cover of night stealing the bulk of Laban's flocks, along with a fair amount of property. Oh, and even the lovely Rachel gets in on the act as she steals her fathers “gods” (some sort of graven images, I suppose) as the web of human deception thickens and continues.

It is all pretty tragic and there is SO much more in this story for us to think about not least of which is the total objectification of the women. Leah and Rachel are mere pawns – given no voice – in the unfolding drama of Jacob's life – a fact that should not go unnoticed AND a reality that is reflected in many religious tenets that continue to objectify and silence women today in church AND society.

There is the approach of prayer that seemingly is a repeated quid pro quo as humans try to strike a deal with God for something they want whether that be a wife or to bear children – rather than seeking God's will in one's life. Again, a practice that many continue to engage in even today.

But, I was taught in seminary that sermons should have only one focus, and even this one will be unresolved in the continuing drama of this story. But, call me crazy, but I think, that is the way life typically goes. We live in “unresolved episodes” for much of our lives – yet still we will see in this story the same truth propounded by Paul even in that which is unresolved: “God NEVER gives up on us.” Not today, not tomorrow, not ever – nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

So while we may not fully be able to relate to the specifics of the story, perhaps you can see the important truth in Jacob's life as well as your own. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of you and me – of all humanity. The God who gives us free will allows us to make wise and poor decisions, but no matter what – God never, ever gives up on us. We can neither hide nor will God distance God's Self from us.

Think about how amazing that is. While we may not feel the Presence of God. God is always there. It's a truth that permeates all of Scripture. It's a truth that permeates all of life. May that truth comfort your heart this day and always.

Amen.