

Sermon – Rising to the Occasion

Sunday, July 30, 2023

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 week we revisited reverence 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 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 stature. 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 into 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 into 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 with Leah, and we will give you Rachel 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, 44-47, 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 – “Rising to the Occasion”

The Text: Jesus put before them another parable: Matthew 13:31a

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

Time and maturation are key ingredients in the kingdom of God. The mystery of rising bread following a woman mixing leaven with three measures of flour is one of the parables Jesus told to explain the kingdom of God.

Those of us who bake bread, many of whom serve on Westminster’s Bread Guild and lovingly prepare our communion 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—time and care. The flour mixed with the leaven and kneaded sits and after a few hours, 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 us. By the leaven, by the grace of God, we can live lives that are nourishing and sustaining within the kingdom of God.

All of God’s children need a little yeast to rise to the occasions life sometimes presents them. Surely Jacob needed 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 a discussion on the merits and shortcomings of the marriage customs in this ancient patriarchal culture which devalued women. My blood pressure will surely rise if we begin down this road.

Instead, let us hold fast to the irony within the story, or what some would call poetic justice, in the “tricking of the trickster.” 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 Jacob’s life, through time and maturation, 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, necessary losses and personal accountability shaped Jacob’s 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 we encounter growing up. 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 immediate point of

view, but rather to understand our present circumstance as one step or misstep on the journey of our lives! 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 devastating loss, the yeast that is a part of our lives sustains and fills us in mysterious and powerful ways. Benedictine Sister and Spiritual mentor, Joan Chittister, reminds us in her book The Story of Ruth, 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. 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.*

This month marks the tenth anniversary of Westminster calling me to serve as your 18th pastor. Last Sunday, Carolyn and Brad Swanson gathered the Pastor Nominating Committee, Peter, and me for an evening at their home to celebrate and to reminisce. I preached my candidacy sermon ten years ago on the final Sunday of July. It was a momentous day in my life as a minister. I wrote in my prayer journal, "I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the Westminster call and truly humbled. If I can lead with 'one mustard seed' of your mercy and lovingkindness, I will bring a smile to your face. Strengthen me for the journey ahead." How much have we grown together this past decade? (pause)

Tucked in my 2013 journal was a congratulatory card from a dear friend, confidant, and advocate with this quote on the cover: "It helps to remember that hidden within every obstacle is a treasure to behold." On the inside she wrote "you have persevered when your calling was in question and held steadfast to your own personal mission when others would have you fail. You have been a role model for many women in the church who look to you for assurance that their lives had a future with meaning and worth. Thank you, dear friend, for your ability to rise through that stain glassed ceiling."

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, wonder, and rising of the kingdom of God and, that by the grace of God, we have the privilege of being a of it. Amen.