

**First United Methodist Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Lectionary Study Guide**

For use the week of July 24-30, 2017

8th Sunday after Pentecost

July 30, 2017

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 29:15-28

^{29:15} 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.

Commentary

Wouldn't you love it if you were accepted for a job, and then the boss said "name your own salary?" That's basically what Laban said to Jacob. Jacob volunteered to work for seven years with no salary, provided that at the end of the time he could have Rachel as his wife. This was a price Laban was willing, even happy to receive. In that culture the father collected a large sum before his daughter could ever be married. At the wedding, imagine Jacob's shock and frustration when his lovely bride was not Rachel, but her older sister Leah. This was not a pretty family picture. Was this a dig at Jacob, who had violated all the rules of the first-born when he grabbed the birthright and blessing away from Esau? Now it seems the "grabber" had been grabbed." It is ironic that Rachel died in childbirth (much later) and was buried near

Bethlehem, while it was Leah who was buried with Jacob in the ancestral tomb at Machpelah in modern Hebron.

Reflection

“Imagine the tension in the tent...” Think of times when there was tension in your tent (home). What caused it? How was God present and active in the situation?

Romans 8:26-39

^{8:26} Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. ³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Commentary

How many times have you knelt with a heavy heart and discovered you had no idea what to say? Paul is saying that the Spirit is helping us when we don't know how to pray. We can't put our prayers into words; but the Spirit prompts with "sighs too deep for words." Since a sigh is like a breath, this may be a pun on the Hebrew word for wind, breath, and spirit (ruach). The verses mention predestination, and Paul didn't have a fully worked-out system of predestination. In the Bible, however, being "predestined" does not mean that we have no choice. Paul is clear that we are free to make choices, even to reject God's love. So the word here means more like God's longing for us to follow God. Human freedom can disappoint that longing. But to those who respond to God's call, there is acceptance and celebration in the future.

Reflection

“All things work together for good for those who love God.” Why do bad things happen to good people? What has been your experience of this reality?

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

^{13:31} He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven 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." ³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

^{13:44} "The kingdom of heaven 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 heaven 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. ⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹ "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Commentary

Maybe you have heard the statement, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to a mountain, be moved, and it will be.” But this parable of the mustard seed in Matthew says nothing about faith; rather, it contrasts the present state of the Kingdom and its end. The point of the parable is the contrast between the tiny present state of the Reign of God and its final state—like the common mustard of Palestine, *Sinapis nigra*, which can grow to about twelve feet high. The same is true for the parable of the yeast. Yeast is most often used as a symbol for corruption, but here Jesus reminds us the yeast is “hidden,” just as God’s realm is hidden in the disciples of Christ’s way. Others are about the surprise and joy of finding such rich treasure, about commitment, judgment and separation.

Reflection

How do you recognize the signs of God’s reign?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b

- ^{105:1} O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- ² **Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.**
- ³ Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.
- ⁴ **Seek the LORD and his strength;
seek his presence continually.**
- ⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he uttered,
- ⁶ **O offspring of his servant Abraham,
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.**
- ⁷ He is the LORD our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.
- ⁸ **He is mindful of his covenant forever,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,**
- ⁹ the covenant that he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
- ¹⁰ which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying,
- ¹¹ **"To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion for an inheritance."**
- ^{105:45b} Praise the LORD!

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.