

The Eleventh Sunday after the Feast of Pentecost – Genesis 29:15-28  
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Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."

So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) 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?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country-- giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

(Genesis 29:15-28)

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Well, it really is nice to be back! I have had the wonderful opportunity to reflect on my vocation as a priest, and the work we share together here as God's people. I return to you feeling rested and reinvigorated as we continue to face the challenges of being the church together in this time and place. I want to say at the outset how grateful I am to Jill and the staff and to Chris and Laura and the vestry, as well as our retired clergy. All of them helped to make this gift possible for me.

There is so much to catch up on! On a personal note, one of the things I've been doing since I last saw you has been to visit some college campuses. I am very aware that a year from now Hathy and I will be getting ready to send our eldest off to college—a wonderful and frightening experience for any parent. And a few years after that we'll be doing the same with James and entering into a new chapter of our married life. It is difficult to imagine the changes that lie ahead. For the past eighteen years our lives have in many ways revolved around our kids' sporting events and music lessons and concerts. But that is, of course, the stuff of our lives—change. The promise we get from God is not that there won't be any change but that God is with it through it all.

Before I left for sabbatical we celebrated ten years of ministry together. The parish has been around for over fifty years, led by five different rectors and several interims over the course of those decades. A few here remember them all: Harold and Tom, now both among the saints triumphant; Earl who is now retired and living in Indianapolis; Gordon, who is currently serving as our diocesan bishop. When a longtime member dies I often exchange emails with Earl and Gordon, trying to keep them connected with people I know they still love and care for. Yet for many here now, who have come to this parish in the past decade, these are only names from a distant past. There is just Rich. Unless, of course, as I said you have come here over the past few months—in which case you are still asking yourself, "really, who is this guy, and where is Jill?" Part of what I hope we have discovered anew as God's people however is that the Church is always bigger than the clergy. That is vital to our mission and ministry as we continue to try to live what we profess—that we are all God's ministers here.

So it has been reassuring to me that during my sabbatical, life here at St. Francis has continued to unfold. The parish has not stood still during my absence—and that is a sign of health and something I take great pride in. The work on the Memorial Garden has unfolded in exciting ways and I noticed the new floor in the kitchen and the gardening work here at the church and at St. Clare House as well. New people have perhaps even come to visit and stayed here and they wonder: who is this guy up front today anyway, and where is Jill? There have been baptisms and burials and plans are underway for another pilgrimage to El Salvador. All of this is good and worth attending to because our lives in Christ are constantly in motion, because faith is about transformation and a God who is committed to making all things new.

The story of God's people and particularly the story of God's encounters with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their families is a story not so different from our lives. It gets told in chapters, about birth and marriage and death and all the stuff in between. Sometimes it reads like a soap opera because sometimes our lives are like that. It's not just about the good stuff but the very real challenges of being a family: the sibling rivalries and generational conflicts that all families must navigate. You've been reading and hearing about this crazy family since June and I don't know how many preachers since then have taken on the Old Testament readings, but today we pick it up together again midway. So let me refresh your memories...

It all started with Abraham and Sarah—back on the weekend of June 8—when God called them to leave behind their old country and set out for a new land, a promised land. God promised Abraham a heritage—that he will be the father of many nations. That promise took on new meaning for me while I was on sabbatical and spent some time with the people of another part of Abraham's family tree—Muslims who trace their lineage to Father Abraham through his first-born son, Ishmael.

And so the story has continued to unfold over these past few months: the miraculous birth of Isaac in Abraham and Sarah's old age; the testing of Abraham on Mt. Moriah, the casting away of Hagar and Ishmael. Isaac grows up and marries Rebecca and they have two boys of their own, Esau and Jacob.

If we hear this story in isolation—as if nothing had happened before and nothing will happen afterwards—then we might find ourselves saying, “poor Jacob.” He falls in love with a beautiful girl and agrees to work seven years for her hand in marriage. He shakes on it with the father-of-the-bride (who also happens to be his mother's brother—but that's another sermon!) *But his uncle tricks him.* His uncle makes a last minute switch on the wedding day and instead of Rachel, Jacob finds himself married to Leah. The narrator is ridiculously direct: the marriage feast happens, there is apparently lots of drinking involved, the marriage is consummated and then this simple declarative statement: “*when morning came, it was Leah!*” Moreover, the best thing the narrator can think to tell us about this older sister is...well, she had nice eyes.

Jacob has been tricked! Poor Jacob! Unless you've been paying attention to the narrative. Then you will recall how he came to be at his uncle's house looking for love in the first place. His old man—Isaac—was on his deathbed. Jacob is the younger brother (granted only by a few minutes) whose elder brother, Esau, is out hunting because his dying father has one last request—some of that delicious stew he is so fond of—the manly chili with lots of meat and hot peppers and very few veggies. Just the smell of it will make dying a little easier. But while Esau is out trying to meet the old man's final request, Jacob and his mother collude to trick Isaac: they cook up some stew just the way Isaac likes it

and because Jacob is a soft-skinned momma's boy they put some animal skins on him to make him seem hairy like his brother; unbelievably it works. The old man is deaf and blind and he blesses Jacob moments before Esau arrives home out of breath and hauling a dead animal with him.

So Brave Sir Jacob runs away. His mother slips a few bucks in his pocket and sends him off to live with her brother, Laban, so that Esau won't kill him. Now there is more to this story and we'll come back to it again over the next few weeks before we transition to the fourth generation of this crazy dysfunctional family. All that in due time...

But doesn't the story take on a different meaning when we remember what has happened previously? It seems the narrator is speaking of something not unlike what the Hindus might call karma. Or as the word on the street would have it, "what goes around, comes around." Jacob has reaped what he previously sowed and I think we are meant to have a good laugh about that. He's not a bad guy—in fact I think he's quite likeable because he is so real, so imperfect, so human. So like us.

*The trickster has been tricked.* It's as if the narrator is winking at us and saying, "you see...you can't run away forever. Sooner or later your past catches up with you. And the only real question is this: what will you do when it does?"

Maybe it is precisely in having an uncle like Laban that Jacob's salvation lies because Jacob and his uncle really two peas in a pod. They deserve each other and there is a certain kind of grace in all of this because in spite of it all these are God's people, just as we are God's people. The stuff of their lives and ours—the good, the bad, and the ugly—that is where God will find us. That is where we find God. Not in some distant heaven far away but taking on flesh—Incarnate; among and in and through us.

So in today's Old Testament reading, Jacob gets a glimpse of how his brother must have felt when he got tricked because now he is on the other side of all that. *When morning came, it was Leah.* Jacob can choose how to react to that: he can become bitter or resentful, seek revenge or turn to alcohol to numb the pain. Or he can take that experience as an opportunity for growth and self-realization that brings healing and new life. We'll have to wait a few weeks to see where this is all going just as in our own lives we have to wait to see how it turns out after the wedding or the baptism or dropping our kid off at college or celebrating a retirement or gathering with aunts and uncles and cousins we haven't seen in years for a funeral.

As the rest of the summer continues to unfold we'll be trying to pay attention to this crazy family because we profess that in so doing we may catch a glimpse of ourselves and that when that happens there is good news not far away, good news about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the God who has promised us a heritage as well, the God who has claimed us and marked us and loves us into new and abundant life.