

In Preaching 101 we're told to say what we want to say, say it again, and say it a third time. This seems to be what our lectionary texts for 3 weeks in a row intend to do. We are to ponder the man, Jacob, one of the most powerful characters in the Bible. Two weeks ago we heard how through deceit he stole the family inheritance from his brother; last week we learned how he ran away so that his brother wouldn't kill him, and how in spite of his bad behavior, he is visited in his dreams by God who declares, that he, Jacob, will be the channel of God's blessing.

This week we find Jacob still struggling to become that channel of blessing. The message repeated time and again is that God can use human beings like Jacob, like us to be instruments of the divine presence, even in spite of ourselves. Couldn't God have chosen a more deserving character than this Jacob? What good news this is for us! God can use us in spite of ourselves! And though Jacob displays a propensity to go it alone, to try to save himself by himself, and shows little trust in the promises of God, God is with him and employs him to be a channel of blessing for generations to come.

Sometimes it is hard to trust that the universe is the domain of a gracious God. Many of us have a large measure of control over our lives and the very fact that we do have this inherent ability to shape our destiny may provide us with an illusion that we can go it alone and that we must just do it! Jacob's whole life becomes a struggle for existence even when God promises to be his companion and sojourner.

Jacob's story is such a lesson in humility and grace; the humility of knowing our place in the world and that we need and all people need grace, because even at our very best, we are so very human. This grace is not “cheap grace.” Jacob's behavior has very real consequences. Today's lesson is carefully crafted echoing the past. Jacob is deceived when Leah becomes his wife because he cannot see his heavily veiled bride in the night's darkness--just like he had deceived his father because Isaac couldn't see that he was giving the birthright to the wrong son.

The verb Jacob uses to upbraid Laban, “*why have you **deceived** me?*” is the same root of the noun Isaac uses when he says to Esau, “*Your brother has come in **deceit** and has taken your **blessing***” (Gen. 27:35). Jacob deceives; Jacob IS deceived. How this repetition of language must have been heard as echoes of his past.

Laban tells Jacob it is the custom “in his land” that the firstborn daughter be the first married. Was Jacob's heart guilt-stricken when he hears this, remembering how in his *own* land it was the custom that the firstborn son be given the birthright? And to bring the point home, Laban uses the word for “firstborn” daughter rather than older daughter. The parallel is complete since Esau was the “firstborn” son. Jacob doesn't have a leg to stand on, since any accusation he could make against Laban would be exactly what he himself had done to his brother. We see that there are consequences for our choices.

It is not that what we do doesn't matter, or that there are no consequences to bear, but rather that none of this thwarts God's movement in history to weave the future.

We learn something more about Jacob in this passage. He is not a weakling, for he is said to have single-handedly removed the stone from the mouth of the well. The shepherds were waiting for help. Whether it was testosterone run amuck when he saw Rachel's face, or his eagerness to make this well his place of betrothal (wells were often the place for romantic liaisons), Jacob is a strong man, and his very strength brings with a sense of self-determination. But God reminds

Jacob of the source of his strength. And so *we* are reminded of the Holy One who is our strength, our rock, our redeemer.

For a little over a year, I served as interim pastor at Mentone, UCC. What was extraordinary about that congregation was their deep reliance and trust on the providence of God. They were people who'd struggled through the civil rights movement, they'd experienced discrimination and hate and deceit and hardship, and therefore, they had no illusion of being able to go it alone. They had the same kind of faith as our dear Marion, who I spoke to this week and who sends her love from Detroit.

To some this trust may seem to be naive and a surrender of self. But it is not. To trust does not mean an absence of self, a helpless abdication of action. To trust is the meeting of the created with Creator as together something new, something novel and beautiful comes to be. We are told that the seven years Jacob labored for Rachel seem like only *a few days because of the love he had for her*. For these seven years Jacob's love seemed to provide him purpose and discipline. His heart is full of his beloved rather than with struggling for his own self-protection and self-determination. Love for God and love for others can raise us above selfishness and to higher callings.

The bulletin suggests God as a weaver of the future. I think of the image if a woman sitting in front of a large frame and patiently moving the throttle in and through the web of threads and colors. And if it's a frame of significant size, it is impossible to see what the completed piece will look like. At points the threads may appear mismatched until the cloth is complete. It is an ongoing work of art and beauty.

Jacob, so very real and human, so very much like us, is nurtured through his life experiences to trust that through him God is weaving the future. If he's a slow learner, it is because we all are and we all need to be drawn back into remembrance and assurance that we are woven into something quite beautiful.

Sometimes we are oblivious to what is being created; we may be unable to see and understand. Sometimes there is no understanding at all; we may be called to something formidable and left feeling quite vulnerable. It is in that moment that we are faced with the question: Do we believe that there is a Holy, Divine Spirit that can use our lives, lives that are full of irony, mistakes, and disappointments?

Do we trust in the wisdom of the Holy who brought forth order from out of chaos in the beginning and can do so within our lives even today? Can we let go a little of the struggle and simply rest in the assurance that the weaver of our future and all futures is One of love and steadfast faithfulness? May this be our prayer and the message of today.