

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Genesis 29:15-30

TRICKSTER GETS TRICKED

If you have been following our readings in Genesis, you know that today Jacob experiences some of his own medicine, doesn't he? The shoe is on the other foot. In today's reading, Jacob discovers that there is another family member who is just as shrewd, just as capable of deception as he has been with Esau and Isaac. And this time, that other family member is not his mother, Rebekah, but instead it is Rebekah's brother, Laban.

If this were a theatrical production or a movie, who do you think would be selected to narrate these events? Would it be Laban who has arranged his daughter's marriage to Jacob and before that, remember, he had arranged Isaac's marriage to his sister? He is, after all, the father of the bride and he is the patriarchal head of a family that will eventually produce enough wealth and enough powerful leaders to become, by God's strength, the Hebrew people, a family of God, those who will fulfill what God promised to Abraham, a chosen family, that they might be a blessing to others.

It's interesting, isn't it, that his daughter Leah, the older, might in fact be the strongest candidate for a virtuous narration? Now she is complicit in this sordid family story, but Leah is only following the rules, the customs of the day, the intricacy of decency. If you have ever planned a wedding, you know there are rules to follow, or you will experience peril. Leah tells the story with her life. Of all of these new brides of Jacob, Leah produces seven of Jacob's thirteen children. Leah, of all these characters, seems most intent upon cooperating with God's blessing on Abraham and Isaac and Jacob's descendants. It is Leah who trusts God to work things out for her family's future. Finally, we do well to remember that through Leah, the family produces a leader we came to know as King David. And eventually, therefore, it is through Leah that our Savior, Jesus, comes to us.

If Leah had been a male, I think she would have received a more conspicuous spot in the retelling of our history. We would list her name with all the names of the patriarchs. I am grateful that God doesn't whitewash the story of Leah, the story of Israel. Clearly, Jacob, the younger, and eventually his son, Joseph, the youngest, become gifted leaders, creative problem solvers, instruments which God can use. But Leah overcomes not only the heartbreak and the deception, the family dysfunction, the intrigue of these relationships, she even overcomes the resentment of her own sister.

So when we are attempted to put on our Sunday faces, to show up here and pretend that our lives and our families are perfect, that is when it would do us well to admit that there is pain and brokenness enough to go around. In a story like this, a story which speaks to our lives, we do well to remember that none of us live beyond the ultimate narrator, the one who has the ability to redeem our family and our circumstances. So when we come to church, it would be better if we were bold and we brought our stories as they are rather than clean them up and make them presentable. It would be better if we brought our whole selves into this place, a place where God is constantly at work despite our misunderstanding of what God has planned. When we come here, God will help us—enable us—to overcome our lives at those moments when we believe

they are at their worst, precisely at those moments that seem most hopeless. And God will help us, as theologian Moltmann and others have said, live into a future marked by God's beauty, a lavish, splendid future which is stronger than our worst deception.

Now we may be able to come here and put on our faces and fool one another for a little while. But ultimately, God is and will be just and holy. And God's plan for us will not be undone, either by our deception or by the power of our ability. It is not our prowess that will win the day, but it is God's constant work in our midst. But when we see others, and we recognize that they are the object of God's concern, the story of God is retold, and is still being told even here in this service today. It is the same story, where God blesses Leah and Jacob, the story which works for good despite the motives of the characters.

Rachel's son, Joseph, will eventually speak those words of concern to his own brothers who had sold him into slavery: "Even though your actions were intended for evil, God used them for good." That is our hope, isn't it? Even when our motives are at their worst, when we are most selfish, most self-absorbed, even when we would perpetuate evil on others and seek revenge, God chooses the unlikely, the weak, to accomplish the improbable.

So let us echo an unlikely disciple named the apostle Paul. Let us echo the Savior who was often viewed as a failure—Jesus, the Christ. Let us stand and use the words of scripture to affirm that God is at work in our midst.

[Adapted from Matthew 13:43–52; Romans 8:35–39]

ONE: We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.

ALL: **“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. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.”**

ONE: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For Your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

ALL: **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.**