

The Trickster Gets Tricked

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Psalm 105:1-11; Genesis 29:15-28

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

July 26, 2020

We continue our summer sermon series this week with the central character of Jacob, with the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith through the book of Genesis, and we are reminded that the governing theme of this narrative – ever since the call in Genesis 12 – is how God is using this family, this conflicted, very human family, to bring blessing to the world. That astonishing, sovereign theme governs this narrative, even as it governs our own faith. A theme song for this narrative could be the hymn, “God is working his purpose out.” “God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year, God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near; nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.”

That is where we are headed. It is where we are headed in this story. It is where we are headed in the world and in our own lives. God is bringing blessing to the world.

What is *fascinating* is how we get there. Those of us who are linear thinkers, who like outlines, and to-do lists, and organize our lives from point A to point B and then to point C, those of us who like to be efficient and direct and decent and orderly, would *like* for the blessing to come to the world in a straight line.

But in this narrative – as in our lives – things are not like that. Things are messy, people are messy, the church is messy, and it would appear that God is OK with that, or at least, that God allows that to be the case.

God is bringing blessing, and God summons the faith community to respond. Here at Lewinsville, one way that we have articulated that response is that we are here to “love and serve God by responding to human need.” We understand that the gospel meets us in our need, meets us wherever we have our backs against the wall, meets us in our spiritual needs and meets us in our material needs. The gospel is concerned, not only with the spirit, but also with the flesh. Ever since the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, it has been exceedingly clear, if it was not already, that God cares about the human condition in its fullness.

We are living through a time of intense human need. Human need and human hurt are everywhere around us. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused human suffering and exposed human hurt that was already there. One such human need is the need for safe housing. Over 100 million people in our country are renters, and with the economic

impact of the pandemic, the rise in unemployment, and the approaching end of a federal moratorium on evictions, an eviction crisis in the renting community is looming. States and communities and local efforts are working to develop strategies to respond to this crisis. Researchers at Princeton University have developed an "Eviction Lab," a database of evictions in each state. In their words, "safe, stable, and decent housing has always been central to ensuring health and stability."¹ The human need for safe, reliable housing is crying out for a response.

According to our narrative, ever since Genesis 12, God has been bringing goodness and blessing into the world. God is working God's purposes out, in the midst of everything that is going on, in the midst of all the loss, all the conflict, all the turbulence. God is at work, and according to the narrative, God is glad to use the most unlikely characters. We have been with Jacob for the last couple of weeks, and during that time, we have come to know him as ... a complicated character. Between chapter 25 and 29, we learned that Jacob is a youngest brother, he is aggressive, he is deceptive, he is hated, and he is on the run. We also learned that God is with him, that God will keep him, and that God will not leave him. Jacob is a trickster, but he is also a carrier of God's blessing.

In our text from Genesis 29, that Carol just read for us, we see that Jacob has rather met his match in his uncle Laban. Laban is a key supporting actor in this story. Though his name is not as well known, Laban plays a recurring role. Jacob has been on his way to Laban ever since he stole the family blessing from his brother Esau. He has come, at his parents' behest, to find a wife. After all, in this family, the blessing is understood to pass from one generation to another. As soon as Jacob arrives in town, he sees and falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. Jacob, the younger son, falls in love with Rachel, the younger daughter. Jacob offers to work for his uncle Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel. Laban agrees to the deal. Because of Jacob's love for Rachel, the time flies by.

But on their wedding night, Laban pulls a fast one, and instead of giving Jacob his younger daughter Rachel, he gives Jacob his older daughter Leah, and Jacob somehow does not notice until the morning, at which point it is too late. He is now married to Leah. *The trickster has been tricked.* Laban tells Jacob that if he wants Rachel, he may work another seven years, which Jacob does.

... Now, with a story like this, it can be hard to know where to start.

We may observe how this story is deeply cast in patriarchal categories and practices, where one man gives his daughters to another man, as though they are trading property. We may also notice that Jacob has rather gotten a taste of his own medicine. Though it is clear from the overall narrative that Jacob is carrying the divine

¹ <https://evictionlab.org/covid-policy-scorecard/>

blessing, Jacob does not just roam through the narrative, pillaging everyone in sight. He can be hurt, just as much as he can hurt others. In 27:35, father Isaac tells Esau that Jacob *came deceitfully* to take away the blessing. And in 29:25, Jacob complains to Laban, using the same root vocabulary word, saying, "Why have you *deceived* me?"

The one who got ahead by deception has now been caught by deception. As the apostle Paul says in Galatians 6:7, using some of this same language, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow." We may try to fool others, but we cannot fool God.

But what this story teaches is that God is *also* willing to use our deceptions, to work with them and, in some mysterious way, to work through them to bring about God's purposes. It is because of Laban's deception that Jacob marries both Leah and Rachel. It is Leah and Rachel, together, who become the mothers of the twelve sons of Jacob. The twelve sons of Jacob become the twelve tribes of Israel, who then are a kind of forerunner of the twelve disciples of Jesus. God's purposes work themselves out in surprising ways.

The story of Jacob teaches us a great deal about ourselves, and it teaches us so much about God. Telling Jacob's story invites a high degree of self-awareness, because as we have noted before, Jacob is the character who – in the story we will read next week – has his name changed to Israel, so that Israel is telling the autobiography of the community of faith through Jacob's story. The community of faith is itself capable of deception and manipulation – just like Jacob – and the community of faith can get deceived and manipulated – just like Jacob. We are both the trickster and the tricked. We are vulnerable, and we are manipulative. This story teaches us that we should be up-front about this, we should confess our sins, we do not need to anxiously project an image of ourselves as the noble ones, because that's not the full truth about ourselves.

But the story also teaches us that God uses people like us, broken people like us, people like Jacob, people like Laban, to bring blessing, to accomplish God's purposes, and to respond to human need. "God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near; nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea." To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.