

Sermon for July 30, 2017 (Proper 12, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11,45b; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Title: In His Joy He Goes

“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” (Matthew 13:45-46).

My friends, what is it that you search for? What is it that you desire, that you are longing for?

Today we finish our time this summer in hearing the stories of our ancient forebears in the faith. Jacob is sent by his father Isaac back to their homeland, to his uncle Laban, in order to find a wife. He does that. In fact, he finds TWO wives!

There is such incredible irony in this story. If you recall the history of Jacob, you will remember that he is the one who swindled his brother out of his birthright and then deceived his father in order to get the blessing of the firstborn in place of his brother.

Such treachery. Such nasty deception. But now, like sweet desserts, his own style of treachery is being used against him.

The one who bought his brother’s birthright for a simple bowl of lentil stew is unable to purchase the wife he wants.

The one who deceived his own family is now deceived by his own relatives.

After all, it had been Rebekah’s idea to deceive Isaac in the first place. Rebekah was Jacob’s mother and she was the younger sister of Laban. Clearly, this kind of scheming and deception ran deep in this family.

And yet, this is the family of the promise! This is the family chosen and blessed by God to bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

On a purely practical level, I shudder to think about what it must have been like to be Jacob. The tension and stress that he must have lived with, brought on completely by himself!

It reminds me of a story about some faithful Midwesterners here in the States who got up early on one beautiful Lord's Day and went to worship in their local church.

However, before the bell rang and worship began, the folks sitting in their pew suddenly screamed as Satan himself appeared up front! Everyone started running for the doors, trampling each other in a frantic effort to get away from the evil one. Soon everyone had evacuated the church - except for one elderly gentleman who sat calmly in his pew. He did not move and he seemed oblivious to the fact that evil had invaded the church!

Now, this confused and irritated the Satan a bit, so he walked toward the man and asked in his menacing voice, "Don't you know who I am?"

"Yep, sure do," replied the elderly gentleman.

Satan asked, "Aren't you afraid of me?" "Heck no," the gentleman replied.

Satan, now even more perturbed, asked, "And why are you not afraid of me?"

The man calmly replied, "Shucks! I've been married to your sister for 48 years!"

I'm not about to label either of these great Matriarchs as "the sister of Satan", but really, what kind of household life do you think they had? Jacob and Leah and Rachel! Deception. Treachery. Jealousy. Bitterness. Hatred.

I'm sure that sometimes it felt a bit like a living hell to each of them.

You understand, I hope, that these primary pillars of the faith in the book of Genesis are NOT moral exemplars. In general, at least by our standards, they tend to treat each other horribly. And yet, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel – they are the ones through whom the living God moved to shape human history.

By the way, have you wondered HOW Jacob could have been so duped? How he could not distinguish between the sisters on his wedding night?

The text doesn't tell us, though there are a number of theories.

It was dark and ancient lamps did not give off much light.

It was a party and Jacob most likely had imbibed many cups of wine.

The bride may have worn a heavy veil. These are all possible explanations.

But some ancient rabbis had devised another theory.

There is an old midrash which explains that perhaps Jacob was even deceived by Rachel as well, though with good intentions.

The story says that Jacob had been rightly suspicious of his future father-in-law, that he just might play this kind of trick on Jacob. So, to prevent this, Jacob had given certain special tokens to Rachel – perhaps a certain anklet or bracelet – so that Jacob would know that it was her and not Leah, despite the veil that she would be wearing.

However, the story says that Rachel had a good heart, and she was concerned that Leah was to be embarrassed, shamed, dishonored in the eyes of all by being passed over for the younger sister.

So she gave these special tokens to Leah to wear on this special night, though Leah did not know what significance they carried. In this way, Rachel participated in the deception, albeit for a different reason than her father – and for a far nobler one.

Perhaps this is so. Perhaps Rachel's heart was the most pure among that group.

But I ask you to consider how Jacob responded to this deception.

He was angry, yes. But he did not explode. He did not kill anyone. He did not storm away in disgust. Instead, he agreed to work for her for another seven years!

Fourteen years is a long time. That's no joke.

But do you know why he responded like this?

Because he loved Rachel. He desired her. He longed for her.

Did you know that Jacob's love for Rachel is one of the few mentions of romantic desire in the entire Bible?

Courtship and romance are just not important themes in the Bible. This whole sector of life is largely ignored in the scriptures. But here, it is carefully noted that Jacob loved Rachel. He desired her.

In this same way, the Lord Jesus gives us little parables of the kingdom which stress the importance of desire. Not romantic love, to be sure, but still, personal desire and interest. What is in the heart.

He said, “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” (Matthew 13:45-46).

This merchant desired that pearl, that unique, distinctive pearl of great value. The one who found the buried treasure wanted that field and was thrilled to buy it!

To Jacob, Rachel was that one pearl of great value. She was that one field with buried treasure.

Just consider again what Jacob did for his beloved Rachel. 14 years of working, waiting, away from his home, putting his own life and dreams on hold, and putting up with a bitter and unhappy Leah – all in order to have his beloved.

Jacob is like the merchant in search of fine pearls. He found one of great value, and her name was Rachel. And even when a different one was substituted, he would not be content. Perhaps he did not precisely sell all that he had, but he did whatever it took, whatever was required, to get that pearl.

Desire and longing. In these parables, the Lord Jesus invites us to long for the kingdom of heaven. To not settle for lesser things.

We are invited to pass through these temporal things of life without becoming attached, without becoming distracted, but with a clear-eyed focus on that “life that truly is life” (1 Timothy 6:19).

And even when our dreams and hopes are upended by the treachery of the world, we are called to keep to the vision of life that is good and holy and complete – a life lived in union with the living God.

So what is it that you search for? What is it that you desire, that you are longing for?

Do you have that longing and desire in your heart for true life with God that is far deeper and far more real than any of the superficial games of merely human existence?

There is no need to leave this world in order to find this deeper life. It is here, hidden, working its magic like yeast, growing like a seed planted in the field.

Life in the kingdom of heaven can be found and we can experience far more of God than we imagine.

But if we are not looking for it, not longing for it, then we'll miss it altogether.

What matters is our desire, our longing. We have to want it!

We have to want life in the kingdom of God. We have to fall in love with God and desire God's presence more than anything else!

If you do that, my friends, and remain faithful to this longing, I promise that you will never be disappointed. Amen.