

A Rising Tide

Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39

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I've always felt kind of bad about my reaction to the birth of my baby brother, back when I was five years old. It was clear that this was big, happy, exciting news for the grown-ups, and it was clear that they thought it would be for me, too. "Just imagine - you're going to be a big sister!", they'd enthuse. And on the day it happened, my kindergarten teacher - a normally reserved woman who warned us often that she had actual eyes in the back of her head - answered the classroom phone, spoke briefly, hung up, and exclaimed "Tina! You have a BABY BROTHER!", grabbing me tight in a highly uncharacteristic hug.

But the truth was, I wasn't too thrilled about the whole thing. I may have been young, but I knew enough to expect a lot of changes when this baby came. And of course I was right - he was adorable, and amazing, and pretty much managed to suck up every last bit of parental and grand-parental attention. We have pictures of him as a toddler that make him look like one of the woodland creatures from a Walt Disney cartoon, all chubby cheeks and wide, earnest blue eyes. So I really felt for Leah when I read today's Old Testament passage. She's the booby prize in her dad's underhanded scheme to get both his daughters married off and an extra seven years of labor out of his favorite employee and son-in-law. After a lifetime of sibling rivalry with a pretty and charming younger sister, she faces a future of more of the same - only now it's rivalry for a husband, and she'll always be the loser.

The idea of winners and losers crops up a lot in the Bible. In the Old Testament it's the Jewish people who are the winners; they're God's Chosen, after all. In the New Testament it's the followers of Jesus, who, it is promised, will ultimately be sorted from everyone else and blessed with an eternity in God's Kingdom. Jesus uses images of sheep vs. goats; of weeds vs. wheat; of broad vs. narrow gates; all distinguishing between the people who "get" God's message and those who don't. This is an aspect of Christianity that gets a lot of play in some quarters. As a teenager who had only vague connections to a Presbyterian church, I was warned by some of my peers that I wasn't a "real" Christian because I'd never been born again. Many of us have been saddened and dismayed that Barack Obama's faith is called into question because - even setting aside those who incorrectly believe he is a Muslim - the particulars of his theology don't accord with those of some who, like James Dobson, feel themselves in a position to judge. Google "real Christian" and you'll find a host of websites eager to tell you that just because you think you're a Christian, that doesn't mean you are. (The authors of these websites are very happy to tell you if you pass muster, in case you're wondering, but you should be braced for the worst.)

This smug exclusivity is irritating and off-putting, to be sure. I can tell you from personal experience that it can keep a person out of church for decades, even a lifetime. It was a conscious act of defiance for me the day that I decided Christianity was big enough to have room for even someone like me. Someone who was filled - to the brim! - with doubt, but who still felt a call to the spiritual tradition of my ancestors, to the rich rewards of corporate worship and spiritual community.

I once had a conversation with a brother-in-law who was planning a trip to Europe at a time when it was a little embarrassing, possibly even dangerous, to be an American abroad. I think our refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on climate change still rankled, and our shameful abuses at Abu Ghraib prison were somewhat fresh in the news. He was thinking of posing as a Canadian while he traveled – less to explain or justify, he was thinking, and maybe a little bit safer. I realized as he said it that that was something I could never do. It's certainly not because I agree with everything our government does, and not because I'm proud of everything our country represents. Rather, it's because I'm an American too. I'm not going to let someone else have exclusive claim to that identity, because it's my identity too. The candidates I vote for, the policies I support might not always be realized, but that doesn't mean that they don't count. I won't pretend to be something else.

And that's how I feel about Christianity. You know, I'm studying the Bible too, and I'm praying too, and my heart is open to God's word. I am a real Christian. I won't pretend to be something else.

The parables in today's reading give us images which represent the Kingdom of Heaven. They are deeply puzzling images, especially the first one. You know, mustard doesn't grow into a tree, not even in the lands of the Mediterranean. It's a weed, it wouldn't be welcome in a field, especially if it grew so big it attracted birds who then built their nests in it! And yeast: if you know the story of Passover you know that yeast is, at least at that time of year, considered to be unfit for a kosher diet, and even an accidental leavening of a grain, such as might happen if you mix wheat with water and let it sit for longer than 18 minutes, makes it *treif*, or ritually unfit to eat. What these images have in common, though, is this: you start with something very, very small. From it you get something that grows surprisingly large. And – in the worldview of an observant, pastoral Jew of the first century AD – in the worldview of Jesus – you get something that is marked by impurity, by corruption, by taint.

How can these images represent the Kingdom of Heaven? Why does Jesus characterize the Kingdom of Heaven using images that connote defilement and corruption?

The Kingdom of Heaven is the world as it ought to be. Remember the Lord's Prayer, which prays that God's "will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven". The Kingdom of Heaven is something we strive to realize here on Earth. We strive to realize the Kingdom of Heaven when we love God, and love our neighbor.

That mustard seed, and that leavened bread, are like the Kingdom of Heaven **because** nothing's been sorted out of them. The Kingdom of Heaven includes the whole plant, the birds, the nests, everything; it includes the whole 3 measures of flour and the yeast; it includes the pure and the impure, the good and the bad. It's all in there together. And everything all together grows, exceeding expectations: a mustard seed gives rise to a tree; the bread dough overflows the bowl.

I believe that what Jesus is telling us in these parables is that it's our job to build this kind of Kingdom of Heaven. One in which everyone is included; in which all are accorded basic human rights, in which all are recognized as worthy of God's love, in which abundance and possibility are available to all. It is in another parable, of the Shepherd and His Flock, that Jesus names this as his explicit purpose: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Competition is a powerful and ubiquitous force in our world. It's a driving force behind our economy; it's what makes spectator sports so interesting. In the classroom it can motivate previously apathetic students to engage with passion, though I haven't yet seen it ignite any real interest in the subject matter itself. It's fun, it's engaging, and it's motivating, but it has a dark side too. Where there is a winner there is also a loser. And when we start talking about the Kingdom of Heaven as a place where some get in, some don't, and when we claim to know who those people are, we have exposed that dark side. We have proclaimed ourselves the winners in the competition to get into the Kingdom of Heaven.

But that is not our proclamation to make. In another parable, the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a field sown with wheat, in which an enemy has sneaked in and planted weeds – maybe mustard! – alongside. The servants ask the landowner if they should pull out the weeds, and he says no. Pulling out the “weeds” could uproot the “wheat” alongside. No, he says. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that point they can be sorted.

Things would be simpler if we could “pull out the weeds” and get on with things. As a teacher in a public school classroom I was reminded of this almost every day. If we could just remove every troublemaker, every unmotivated student, every child who was difficult to teach, how much easier a teacher's job would be. I have a friend who teaches in an elementary school special ed classroom, and she has earned a reputation for being able to work with very difficult children, children with learning disabilities and behavior disorders. One of her students last year – a 10-year-old boy who outweighed her by at least 50 pounds – was prone to bouts of uncontrollable rage; he had broken the bones of previous teachers, and a desk could easily become a weapon in his hands. She had to approach her job with the same caution as a police officer would, but without the Kevlar vest, and with an unrelenting attitude of love. This boy was dangerous, but he was also just a child. He too has a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In Eugene Peterson's translation of Paul's letter to the Romans, we read Paul's exhortation: “All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.”

It is not our job to decide who's the winner, who's the loser, in the race to get into the Kingdom of Heaven. It is our job to care for this “pregnant creation”, as complicated and unwieldy and uncontrollable as it sometimes becomes, as much as we'd rather thin it out and tidy it up. It is our job to create a world in which all can be raised up, not just those born to privilege, wealth, and opportunity. In which all are known to be worthy of love – not just the lovable ones, not just the pretty little sisters, like Rachel. In which all are accorded the dignity suited to one of God's creation. In which all are extended a radical and extravagant welcome. In which we leave ultimate judgment not to ourselves – but to God.

Amen.

Genesis 29:15-28 (The Message)

The Message

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¹⁴⁻¹⁵ Laban said, "You're family! My flesh and blood!"

When Jacob had been with him for a month, Laban said, "Just because you're my nephew, you shouldn't work for me for nothing. Tell me what you want to be paid. What's a fair wage?"

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Now Laban had two daughters; Leah was the older and Rachel the younger. Leah had nice eyes, but Rachel was stunningly beautiful. And it was Rachel that Jacob loved.

So Jacob answered, "I will work for you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."

¹⁹ "It is far better," said Laban, "that I give her to you than marry her to some outsider. Yes. Stay here with me."

²⁰ So Jacob worked seven years for Rachel. But it only seemed like a few days, he loved her so much.

²¹⁻²⁴ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife; I've completed what we agreed I'd do. I'm ready to consummate my marriage." Laban invited everyone around and threw a big feast. At evening, though, he got his daughter Leah and brought her to the marriage bed, and Jacob slept with her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as her maid.)

²⁵ Morning came: There was Leah in the marriage bed!

Jacob confronted Laban, "What have you done to me? Didn't I work all this time for the hand of Rachel? Why did you cheat me?"

²⁶⁻²⁷ "We don't do it that way in our country," said Laban. "We don't marry off the younger daughter before the older. Enjoy your week of honeymoon, and then we'll give you the other one also. But it will cost you another seven years of work."

²⁸⁻³⁰ Jacob agreed. When he'd completed the honeymoon week, Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid.) Jacob then slept with her. And he loved Rachel more than Leah. He worked for Laban another seven years.

Romans 8:26-39 (The Message)

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²⁶⁻²⁸ Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

²⁹⁻³⁰ God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him. After God made that decision of what his children should be like, he followed it up by calling people by name. After he called them by name, he set them on a solid basis with himself. And then, after getting them established, he stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what he had begun.

³¹⁻³⁹ So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture:

They kill us in cold blood because they hate you.

We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one.

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.