

HAVE WE UNDERSTOOD ALL THIS?
Genesis 29: 15-28a; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52
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by Pat Berger

"Have you understood all this?" Jesus asked his disciples. They answered, "Yes," That was pretty bold of them, don't you think? Maybe it was one of those situations where the disciples all kind of looked at each other, and thought about how Jesus had been teaching them for all of these chapters and days now; then pulled their shoulders back, held their breath, and with all of the courage that they could muster said, yes -- hoping against hope that somehow it would turn out to be true. I have done that.

David Lose writes, "Law and Gospel is all about naming reality. It's about telling the truth, twice. First, we hear the difficult truth of our brokenness, our fears, (and) our sins. And then we hear the good and gracious news about God's response to our condition, for Christ's sake, no matter what."

So: to our reading for today from Genesis. This is a strange story to our ears, AND one that shows both human brokenness and God's grace. It is clearly from a time long ago and far away, where society was very different from what we know today. Jacob has asked Laban if he might have his (Laban's) younger daughter as his wife; Laban says sure thing, if Jacob will stay and work for him for seven years. Jacob agrees to that, works the seven years. When wedding time comes, it is apparently dark, and Jacob ends up with the older sister instead of the younger -- but, Laban says, if Jacob will only work seven more years, he can have the younger sister also. So he does, and he does.

And God can bring good for the kingdom out of this situation? How are we to understand that? Indeed, God can and does. In a time when women were considered to be property, not people, God used two wives and two maids (Laban had given each of his daughters a maid, also) to give birth to the twelve tribes that are eventually Israel.

There are times when God's people seem to give up on God, but God never, never gives up on God's people.

The disciples no doubt knew this story, and perhaps it is a part of what they were beginning to understand. They have had their brokenness named, and that of those all around them. But is that the end? Jesus constructs these parables, that we just heard, hoping that the disciples -- and we -- might begin to ponder God's reign, and perhaps even to seek it, and perhaps even to seek it above all else. No, Jesus tells them, their brokenness is not the end: it is simply the beginning. And, the beginning is so very small, compared with what God has in mind for them. God will start, every time, with who they are, and bring out of that: growth for the Kingdom.

Think about the mustard seed, Jesus tells his disciples. It is not the smallest seed, but among the smallest. And it grows to a large bush. One of the commentators said that it likely isn't hefty enough for most birds to build a nest, but still: from a very small seed, a large bush grows. Or think about yeast. Imagine bread without yeast. Flour and water, pretty much -- until one puts in the yeast and it does its work.

And then Jesus told them about a treasure that a man found in a field. He buried it again, left the field and sold everything that he owned and bought that field. Or the very fine pearl that the merchant found. Realizing its value, he sold all that he had to buy that one pearl.

Jesus started this time with his disciples talking about small things. He moved to talking about ordinary people to whom big things happened. There was joy in these parables, there was excitement, and right things happened. Think about the disciples hearing these stories. Think about other ordinary people hearing them . . . like: us! Think about the extraordinary ordinary people who are this Plymouth church. Your energies for and in and through this church -- you do wonderful things for this area, and for the world, and for the Kingdom! Justo Gonzalez, in his commentary on Matthew, asks his readers to take it all a step, or a few steps, further. In the parable, the people were giving up everything for something else of great value -- say, for

instance, the Kingdom. What, Dr. Gonzalez asks, might we still give up in order to grow closer to the Kingdom? God can start with not-so-much, like disciples who had been fishermen and tax collectors and like any one of us, and bring about God's great and glorious divine kingdom.

I am sure that I have shared with you before one of my favorite Henri Nouwen quotes, and I'm going to share it again today, because it just fits. Dr. Nouwen writes, "Ours is the God who says to us, 'I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness, and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover and your spouse. . . yes, even your child . . . wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.'"

We don't need to bring God's Kingdom.

The Kingdom is here.

Let us pray.