

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Donald DiXon Williams

RCL: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 LM: 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52 or 13:44-46

Like the story of Samson and Delilah, this story in Genesis of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and Laban has all the ingredients and intrigue of a first-rate made-for-television movie. As with any good soap opera, it has love, lust, sex, jealousy, sibling rivalry, deceit, and betrayal.

Because of his unsavory past, Jacob finds himself in a situation where he has to leave the comforts of his own home to find a new life in another place. He will be among people who are his family, but he does not know them and they do not know him. On his journey he meets his cousin Rachel, who tends her father's sheep. It's love at first sight, and soon he is in the home of his uncle, Laban. After a month Laban feels he should not let Jacob continue to work for him without some type of compensation. Jacob should have seen the movie *Jerry Maguire* and yelled like the Tom Cruise character, "Show me the money!" Instead, Jacob enters into a seven-year contract to work for Laban so that he can marry Rachel. Laban readily accepts the offer, and before you know it, the seven years are completed and Jacob is ready to marry and enjoy the company of the woman he loves. The only problem is that on his wedding night a switch is made, and the company he keeps is with Rachel's older sister Leah—the wrong one. Jacob the trickster is tricked. If he wants Rachel, he now has to work another seven years, and he agrees. Now that's what I call love.

I told you this was sexy stuff! But now let's take a look at this story from another angle. In this version we see an immigrant going into a new socioeconomic environment, without a job or a place to stay or food, yet trying to find a better life. Like many other immigrants, he has family where he is going but doesn't know them very well. He ends up living in cramped quarters with his family and working in the family business for minimum wages, with long hours, poor working conditions, no benefits or Workers' Compensation. In the process of starting a family, he runs into unexpected problems that drain his already meager resources and keep him in his dead-end job twice as long as if he had labored under normal circumstances.

Many families today find themselves in situations very similar to Jacob's. Granted, people often contribute to their own problems, but there also are times when people find themselves dealing with situations and problems for which they are not responsible and over which they have no control.

That is why Bread for the World advocates for improvements in programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This assistance program can be the bridge to help low-

income people bring their families out of poverty. Education and childcare can be very important tools to enable families to get and keep good-paying jobs that will help them leave poverty behind. BFW's advocacy helped more legal immigrants have access to TANF benefits. I wonder if Jacob would have qualified for TANF? He sure qualified for his own TV movie.

Some of the reasons that drive my vocation at Bread for the World today are found right in the passage from Romans. Long before I came to Bread for the World, Friday Morning Prayers, as we call them, were already engrained in the fabric of the movement. I am still impressed that every Friday without fail staff members in the BFW offices and others in the movement across the U.S. are praying. Many times after we have exhausted all our efforts and used all the tools of the trade of advocacy, we still need, and by God's grace have, the power of prayer. Verse 26 reminds us that even when we don't know what to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us. With the power of the pen and the power of prayer, we have been able to move mountains and hills (Capitol Hill, that is). With confidence we can say that no matter how good or bad things look with the natural eye, in the Spirit "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (v. 28).

Every time I read Romans 8:35, I remember a picture I saw in *Time* magazine showing a starving, weak, naked little boy struggling for his life, trying to make it to a nearby camp during the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s. Following him patiently is a vulture just waiting for him to drop. That image drives my work on the hunger issue today. I can only imagine what happened to that boy, but I know I love him and will never forget him. I feel confident that famine has not separated him from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus.

Children's Time [LH]

You will want to resist the temptation to portray the soap opera aspects of the Jacob/Laban/Rachel intrigue. If you didn't do the mustard seed children's time suggestion last week, use that image or one of the other ones from the descriptions of the kingdom in this week's reading from Matthew. One idea is to bring in a piece of matzoh and a piece of regular bread, and point out that yeast makes the difference in the character of the two types of bread. (Make sure you're clear that matzoh is made for a special purpose and is not inferior because it lacks leaven.) How are our lives changed because God lovingly mixes leaven into our lives and causes us to grow in special ways?

Musical Suggestions

The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor—BP 109
Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah—AAH 140
Kum Ba Yah—AAH 437
Jesus Loves the Little Children—AAH 616