

The Reverend Theo Robinson's Sermon for July 26, 2026
Genesis 29:15-28; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52 - "Stay the Week"

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Over the last few weeks, we have been hearing the story of Jacob. So far, we have known Jacob as a trickster, a manipulator, and a self-serving, lying for his own gain type of person who is more concerned with personal security and preservation than giving a hoot about family traditions and cultural values.

He used Esau to be pulled out his mother's womb. He then bamboozled his brother out of his firstborn birthright by trading it for a bowl of "red stuff," as Esau names the soup. Finally, with the careful connivance of his mother Rebekah, Jacob tricks his dying blind father, Isaac, out of the patriarchal blessing, first given to Abram so long before. So, with birthright and blessing in hand, Jacob runs for his life from the justifiable rage of his brother.

In today's reading, he is out to find himself a wife from the family of his crafty Uncle Laban, his mother's brother. But before we talk about that, I want to give you a brief overview of what happened in the first half of Genesis 29, which we didn't have the luxury of hearing but is an important piece to today's story.

Spurred on by his "ladder dream," Jacob makes his way through the desert. Exhausted, hot, thirsty, and surely near the end of his rope, he comes upon a well. There are three flocks of sheep lying around the well; and on the top of it, there was a large stone. The custom of the people of the area was that when all the flocks from the area got to the well, the shepherds would roll away the stone from the top of the well, they would water their sheep, and then they would put the stone back on the top of the well. This would all be done as a team. After speaking with the shepherds, Jacob discovers that he has arrived in Haran and he is excited! Haran is the land of his mother's family!

Jacob begins to ask the shepherds about his uncle and family, but in the middle of the conversation, Laban's daughter, Rachel appears on the horizon and with her is a huge flock of sheep. A huge flock of sheep means Uncle Laban is rich! And since Jacob's modus operandi is security, he quickly hatches a plan to be alone with Rachel. He figures charm the daughter and get an easy "in" with Uncle Laban.

As Rachel gets closer, however, Jacob's sole motivation to connect with Uncle Laban fades. Rachel is so beautiful that Jacob is knocked over. Rachel isn't just a rich girl, she's a pretty rich girl, and that's about all Jacob needed to know. It's love at first sight!

Jacob shows off to Rachel by lifting the stone from the well – you know that one that usually takes all the shepherds to move – and waters Rachel's sheep. And then, like a gallant knight in shining armor, he takes Rachel's hand and gently kisses it.

Laban is soon told of the appearance of his nephew, and he runs out to meet Jacob. Over the next while, Jacob tells his Uncle Laban the whole story, even how he swindled his brother out of his birthright for soup, and how he tricked his old Dad Isaac with the goatskin to get a blessing! Laban, the king of manipulators himself, slaps his nephew on the back shouts a telling phrase: "You are surely my bone and my flesh!" He means more than they are just related; they are in fact two peas in a tricky pod, one trying to best the other the very minute they meet!

Laban invites Jacob to stay for a month in his house. At the end of that month, he asks Jacob, "Tell me what you're doing here, what do you really want?" And so, Jacob tells him that he wants Rachel as his wife. And now we get back to today's reading where the trickery awaits.

Laban tells Jacob that just because he's family doesn't mean he shouldn't be paid for his work with the flocks and herds. Jacob offers 7 years of employment in exchange for Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban agrees to exchange Rachel for 7 years of labour. When the 7 years are up, Jacob goes to collect his pay. A great marriage feast is arranged at the end of which a veiled woman is thrust into Jacob's tent.

Maybe he was drunk, maybe she was heavily veiled, maybe it was really dark, but somehow Jacob didn't realize until the next morning that he had in fact married the wrong woman. He went storming off to Laban to demand an answer. It was then that Laban revealed the custom of the eldest marrying first which is why Jacob found Leah in his bed. How ironic that birthright is the reason for the switch. By the way, the custom of taking the older daughter before the younger was the same for Jacob's people, but we know that honoring tradition was not at the top of Jacob's priority list.

Crafty Uncle Laban doesn't stop there. He provides yet another deal to the younger, less sophisticated manipulator. "Stay with Leah through the week and then you get Rachel at the end. And I can do this for the low, low price of another seven years of labour." Because his love for Rachel was so strong, Jacob felt he had no choice but to agree or he would have had to give her up forever.

It's hard to find a moral to this story. Laban's trickery won out, unloading both daughters onto Jacob and getting 14 years of free labour out of it. A tough topic considering women's rights and equality, and Jacob as the victim of "what goes around comes around" karma.

But if we look deeper into Jacob's part in this story, there is a glimmer of a silver lining. Jacob gets swept away when he sees something he wants and he works hard for it. But after working so hard, he didn't get quite what he was expecting. Isn't that the way sometimes? We get our hopes up for something and in the end, the grass only appeared greener on the other side?

But maybe we need to follow Laban's advice – "wait a week, and you'll get Rachel too". In other words, stick around for a while longer, trust that it was God who has led you here, trust that God knows what God is doing, be faithful to where God has led you, to what you have been called to do. Sometimes in the process of facing the morning after, you realize that "Rachel", or the ideal, comes as a result of working things through and not leaving the table when you get disappointed, or when things aren't turning out as you expected. It takes patience and trust that the struggles, the disappointments, and all the ugly are part of God's plan for your life and that sticking with it will eventually put you exactly where you are meant to be.

The parables found in Matthew today have a similar lesson of living through the tricky and the ugly before finding the beauty of God's Kingdom. These parables do not describe the kingdom in any specific way, but show us a series of snapshots taken from different perspectives. No single picture is definitive, but each provides a glimpse that adds to our understanding.

In the first of the parables, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a mustard seed that, when sown, grows into a tree in whose branches birds come to nest. The image of the mustard seed highlights initially its smallness and its invisibility when it is sown. Then the image expands to include its inevitable growth and flourishing, its resultant large size that contrasts with its small beginning, and its hospitable environment that sustains nesting birds.

In the second parable, Jesus is telling the story of a woman who was busy making bread. Bread made simply from water and flour is dry and very hard. That is why we mix it with leaven. When you put the dough in a warm place, at the right temperature, the leaven changes the quality of the bread and through the process of fermentation, the whole dough is filled with air, and it becomes very soft. Three measures of flour are enough to

bake bread for 100-150 people. The point is that even a tiny quantity of leaven has power to affect a large quantity of flour.

The usual interpretation of these parables is that big things have small beginnings, which makes sense as each parable talks about something small blossoming into something quite grander. Until you realize, however, that neither mustard seed nor yeast was viewed positively in Jesus' world. Mustard was a weed, dreaded by farmers the way today's gardeners dread English Ivy or Scotch Broom. It starts out small, but before long has taken over your field. Similarly, yeast was a contaminant and almost always represents the wicked nature of sin when mentioned in the Bible.

Why, then, compare the kingdom of God to a weed and a pollutant? Because both mustard seed and yeast have this way of spreading beyond anything you'd imagined, infiltrating a system and taking over a host. The Gospel of God's coming kingdom is threatening before it is comforting, ugly before it is beautiful. It invades our whole world and taints the reality we've grown to accept, challenges the views we've lived by, and calls into question assumptions that have guided much of our lives in the world.

God's new reality is closer than you think, already seeping into your life even though you can't always feel it. No matter what it may look like, God's kingdom will prevail. And so, in the face of war, we claim God's peace. When confronted with illness, we look to God's eternal healing. When faced with hate, we proclaim love. Why? Because the kingdom is coming and, before you know it, will transform everything.

But first we must have patience and trust. God's disruptive, life changing, and ultimately life-giving kingdom is coming. It will take some patience, trust, and perseverance to await it, and when it comes it will likely not be what we expect and perhaps not what we even wanted. But to those who recognize there is something more out there than the world has offered, to those who are willing to acknowledge the deep ache in their hearts for a sense of true if also illusive joy, then it will come as more than we could have imagined and will invade, take over, and transform our lives.

Jacob's story teaches us that while we may not always get what is expected, we should trust that this place that we are in right now could be exactly where God wants us or has been leading us all along; trust that God is working right here, to bring about things we don't even know about that are yet to come!

The parables give us a chance to make the kingdom life and reality Jesus preaches a tad more concrete by pointing us to those whose actions are perhaps inexplicable according to the logic of the world but in tune with the promises of the kingdom.

Church is the place where we remind each other of God's promises and point to places in our lives and the world where we catch glimpses of its presence.

Perseverance, patience, and trust. Get through the morning after. Stay the week. Put in the work. You'll get there in the end.

Amen.