

Treasures

Texts: Genesis 29:15-28; St. Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

In the stories that the book of Genesis tells about the patriarch Jacob, he is portrayed as a great trickster. First, he tricks his older brother Esau into selling his birthright. Later, to ensure that he receives the blessing of his father, Isaac, he puts an animal skin around himself and pretends to the blind old man that he is Esau, because we are told Esau was a hairy man. Thus when Isaac is suspicious of which son it is that he is blessing, he touches Jacob, and feeling the hairy coat mistakes him for Esau and so goes ahead and gives Jacob the blessing that belonged by right to Esau. I frankly have to admit that there is something obviously appalling and unscrupulous about Jacob's *modus operandi* in getting what he wanted; it is not to be recommended to children. Still, the one thing that you do have to admire about Jacob is that he had a clear eye for what was valuable above all else. Esau, for his part, was careless about such things, and tended to trade away the future for the present in a rather short-sighted way.

Yet, there was one time when the tables were turned on Jacob, and he was the one who was played for a chump. This is found in the story of his courtship of Rachel. Coming upon a well in the country of his uncle Laban, he is smitten with Rachel when she comes to the well to water her sheep. In fact, he is so smitten that he first does what is required of all young men who want to impress a girl, namely a feat of strength: he rolls away the stone on the top of the well for her. He then does the second and third thing required for it is said, he kissed Rachel and wept aloud, thus showing himself to be not only strong and manly, but passionate and a really good kisser, and finally even a really sensitive guy. He was good; he also clearly moved fast. But, then, deeply in love, he went to her father Laban, and asked for her hand which was granted upon the condition that he serve Laban for seven years. He did so; upon completion of his time, he

naturally asked for Rachel's hand as his reward. However, Laban then informed him that that is not the way things were done in his country; one never let the younger daughter get married before the older one. So Jacob has to take Rachel's sister, Leah, instead. Jacob is the one who is tricked this time. But still Jacob was consistent. He knew what is really valuable and he knew what he wanted, and so he served Laban for another seven years so that he could marry Rachel. And so he did marry her in the end.

I suppose Jacob got what he deserved – in both the sense that somebody else finally got the better of him, but also in the sense that he got the treasure that he wanted, namely, Rachel. He was willing to do *anything* to get her, even to do some honest labor for once and to swallow his youthful pride.

Jacob and Rachel's story may be the first love story in history in which a young man deeply in love is willing to do anything to get the girl he wants. It certainly was not the last, and every time and culture since then has told such stories. For example, not much later the Greeks told the story of Hero who nightly swam across the Hellespont to meet his beloved, Leander, a priestess of Aphrodite who lived on the other side. In the middle ages, it was his deep love for a departed Beatrice that caused Dante to change his life and make something worthwhile of his art, and it was an unquenchable love that caused Abelard to lose a lot more than his job because he wouldn't give up his beloved, Heloise when her father found out about their affair. More recently, Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* has told us the story of a young man deeply in love with a young woman above his social class, and how after being turned away by her family, carried the torch for her for more than fifty years, until her husband died, and the two of them ended up forever cruising up and down a Colombia river on a steamship of the shipping line he had come to own.

These are wonderful stories, and they are wonderful for anybody who has ever been in love. They are exciting to the imagination of the young who always think that they are the first since Genesis to feel this way, and they cause those of us who are older to smile and even blush when we remember not only what we were willing to do once upon a time, but what we actually did. But they are also wonderful illustrations in a far broader sense of how we ought to pursue single-mindedly what is really important. They are wonderful illustrations in this regard of Jesus' short parables of the kingdom. For, Jesus tells us, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid, and then in his joy goes and sells all that he has in order to buy that field; it is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who upon finding one really good one, sells all that he has in order to buy it. He might have said the kingdom of heaven is like Jacob finding Rachel and his willingness to do anything to marry her. This is to say, that the kingdom of God is the sort of thing we ought to fall in love with, and we ought to see it as more important than anything else, and we ought to pursue it with dedicated single-mindedness.

In saying this, though, Jesus isn't just recommending that we pursue the kingdom with this single-mindedness, as if we had other options. In a sense he is telling us something about what it even means to talk about the kingdom at all. If you are a merchant and you understand what a perfect pearl is, then you know that it means "worth selling everything for it." So, too, if you get what "treasure" is, you know that it means selling everything in order to buy the field in which it is hidden. So, in a similar way, if you understand what the kingdom is, you will give everything for it. If you don't give everything for it, if you aren't single-minded, then you probably don't have the concept down. In a similar way, one might say, if you aren't pursuing the only girl for you, *as* the only girl for you, well, then, she probably isn't. Thus the kingdom. If your attitude to the kingdom is "comme ci, comme ça" as the French say, if you can take it or

leave it, you obviously don't get what the kingdom is about. You have mistaken it for something else, for you don't see it as important as it is. For it is not just "sort of important," it is *everything*. If you don't see it that way, you either don't get it or are perversely self-destructive.

So this is what it means to talk about the kingdom. But there is more than a grammatical point at stake here, as we say in philosophy. For when one then ponders what talking like this about the kingdom means for us, things get, like Esau, a little hairier. Think simply about what it says about church life if this is the way it is with the kingdom. Do we come here on Sunday mornings with the same burning in our hearts that Jacob must have felt for fourteen years before he got to marry Rachel? Do we come here with the single-minded intensity of somebody who has just found treasure and is hustling to buy the field it is buried in so that we can possess the treasure wholly for ourselves? Are we selling all the semi-valuable junk in our lives so that we can get the pearl of great price? After more than thirty years of ministry, I can say rather confidently of the American church, that for most people the answer to that question is "no." Not that people are not well-meaning, but for about two-thirds of them in any given church, the mantra of not having enough time, and not having enough resources has become hypnotic, and even self-fulfilling. The fact of the matter is that most American churches could have the same level of mission that they do now with about a third of the members they carry on their rolls. The rest are fellow travelers; they are not people selling much of anything for a pearl of great price. The fact of the matter is that the mantra of not having time and resources is puzzling. It would seem that the two things that anybody should have control over are what they do with their time and their money. And, indeed, when most people say that they don't have enough for the church, and for the advancement of God's kingdom, they are simply saying that they have already put their time and money to use somewhere else, and don't have enough left over.

With that said, though, let me be fairer, because it isn't quite that simple. What has kept me in ministry and absolutely floored me all these years are the number of people who are really dedicated, and who show so much imagination in the programs they propose and pursue and lead, who are compassionate and giving in the care they offer to others, and whose trust in God is humbling to any minister that would teach them about faith. There are those who have little and give much, and those who are busy and yet always have time. It is because of these people that I know that what I talk about on Sundays is really true. So, even if it is only a third, there really is a third that loves the kingdom the way Jacob loved Rachel.

Furthermore, I also have to be fair in assessing how people do spend their time and their resources. It is only people under the age of maybe twenty who can get up in the morning and have the utter lack of prior commitment that would allow them the total freedom to say how they are going to spend their day or their dime. People have made commitments, such as marriage and family, and have even made them in this very sanctuary. Thus it would be churlish to undercut the commitments we have encouraged and blessed, and said we would support.

So perhaps we ought to look at it this way, a way that doesn't compromise on the total dedication that the choice for the kingdom demands. We have indeed blessed and encouraged all sorts of commitments that take up time and talent and treasure. They are important commitments. But how do you understand them? You can understand them as all on a level and therefore as competing commitments. When you do, you have to apportion your time between your family and your church and your vocation and whatever charitable causes you might have, and whatever sports you want to watch on TV. Now, in that case, you really haven't gotten the concept of the kingdom. You are actually trying to find a lot of different kingdoms and they don't all go together. Or, you can understand that your commitment to the kingdom of God is what makes

possible the fruitfulness of those commitments and their continued significance. It is what gives unity and coherence to a life. For example, in marriage a couple makes a promise in front of God, and asks God's blessing and continued presence so that love and faithfulness, dedication, generosity, forgiveness and patience may grace the marriage. Now, to make those things happen a couple has to spend time on themselves. But if they also see that marriage as being within the kingdom of God they will also know that they have to keep giving of themselves, individually and together, to the kingdom and to its purposes. They have to show up and gain strength and purpose from the God whom they asked to bless and sustain their commitment to each other. They need in their dedication to each other to find God and God's kingdom and to hold onto it as what holds everything else together.

For a number of years now, when counseling couples who are about to be married, I have always asked them what they intend to do, individually and as a couple, for other people. Most of them are utterly surprised at the question because, frankly, it never occurred to them that this was part of the marriage plan. They never thought about such a thing, and actually didn't plan as part of their marriage to do much of anything for other people other than have them over to dinner once in awhile. Some of them find the question utterly irrelevant. But the fact of the matter is that the common projects that a couple undertakes together for other people, their moral and spiritual commitment to the betterment of other people, really is something that strengthens their moral and spiritual commitment to each other and strengthens the relationship. Children are one way that this is done, for children as we all find out soon enough are strangers come into our lives and not just extensions of ourselves. Having children is a major commitment of hospitality. But so too are the commitments we give to others in other areas. So, too is the time and money and effort they give to the church itself in promoting a divine way of life and a way of peace.

Actually, not “so, too” but rather “above all.”

And in this respect, pursuing the kingdom therefore does not mean excluding other commitments, but encouraging them and giving them coherence and unity and meaning. But understand that it can only do this when you take the time and give the energy and the material resources to pursue the kingdom. For to pursue the kingdom, is to look for God everywhere in life, and to bring your life into accord with the God that is everywhere.

Now, coherence in a fragmented life is a very good reason to give yourself this way to the kingdom. But there is another one as well that I want to add. It is one that comes from reading Jesus’ parables of the kingdom in a slightly different way. As we have read them so far, and this is indeed the obvious way to read them, Jesus exhorts his disciples to make the right choice about the kingdom and to give everything for it. He is telling them to get their spiritual and moral act together to pursue the kingdom above all, with single-mindedness and with passion. But why would he recommend that? Why is that the way to go? Why shouldn’t we do some risk management here and spread the risk around, so that if things go south we don’t lose everything? Well, turn the parable around. Don’t read it so that you make yourself the one who sells everything to buy the field; instead make God the one who does that. Don’t think of yourself as Jacob but as Rachel, the one for whom God works so hard. The fact of the matter is, what the kingdom is like is really best seen in what *God* does to bring the kingdom about. And what is that? God is the one who gave everything, and as far as God is concerned, the human soul is the treasure and the pearl of great price, and God will therefore do anything to get it, even becoming human and dying on a cross. In that sense, God is the truly great trickster, for he lets us believe that we are the ones pursuing him, when it is really the other way around. For at the point that we start pursuing the kingdom single-mindedly the kingdom has already found us and entered us and

become us. So let yourselves be part of the trick; let yourselves be found, and then once found and once embraced simply return the single-minded love God has already given in pursuing you, and dwell in his kingdom and no other. For if you will let yourself be loved with great love, it really is not so hard being single-minded in returning that love.