

“More Than Victorious”

Genesis 29:15-28 • Psalm 105:1-11, 45b • Romans 8:26-39 • Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

July 30, 2023

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, soon to become the father of the men who will father the twelve tribes of Israel, has gone back to his ancestral homeland. He has gone, ostensibly, in search of a wife, the way his father Isaac did years before. That had worked well for Isaac; he had returned home with Rebekah, Jacob’s mother. Jacob might be hoping it will go as well for him.

But nothing has gone smoothly in Jacob’s life from the day he was born, when he came out of his mother’s womb gripping the heel of his twin brother Esau. The two of them have been at odds their whole lives. By this point in the story Jacob has swindled Esau out of his birthright and tricked their father into giving him the sacred blessing that was intended for Esau. Esau is furious, so mad he literally wants to *kill* his brother. Jacob’s mother advises him to flee, *far* away, back to their homeland in Mesopotamia. But she also goes to Jacob’s father and presents another reason for Jacob’s departure: she doesn’t want him to marry a woman from the land they are living in. Isaac agrees to her request and sends Jacob back to Mesopotamia, with instructions to marry one of the daughters of Laban, Rebekah’s brother. So there’s the “official” reason why Jacob is heading to Mesopotamia – to find a woman to marry – and there’s the “unofficial” reason, the *real* reason: to flee from his enraged brother.

If you have ever thought that *your* family is messed up, that *your* family has some major issues, that *your* family is pretty dysfunctional – well, you’ve got company. Because here we have what is the *second* most important family in the entire Bible, second only to the Holy Family, the family of Jesus. Jacob is a cheater, a swindler, and a liar; he’s filled with jealousy; his brother is a hothead who flies into rages; their parents have their own prejudices, and each of them has their own favorite child; and the twins’ grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, had a whole ton of issues as well. This family is a *mess!*

And yet, for reasons that seem bewildering, God chose *this* family, of all the families of the earth, to inherit God’s blessings and protection, and ultimately bring about the redemption of the world. Maybe that’s the point. Lord knows, *they* needed a whole lot of redemption themselves!

As Jacob heads on his way, God appears to him in a dream, giving him a series of promises. You heard about that last week. I think that is the *beginning* of Jacob’s faith journey. He makes a bargain with God: *if* God will be with him and keep him and protect him and bring him back safely home, *then* Jacob will serve God, and give one-tenth of everything he owns to God. This is not the kind of bargain a person of mature faith makes. A person with mature faith doesn’t *bargain* with God, doesn’t engage in “if-then” strategies with God; a person with mature faith just *trusts* God, and offers a tenth of their wealth and income to God, *regardless* of anything God might or might not do for them in the future. So Jacob has a long way to go before he’s going to be a good role model for the rest of us.

Jacob arrives in Paddam-aram in Mesopotamia, and he comes to a well, where he meets his cousin Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban. She is bringing Laban's sheep to the well for water. Jacob does the gentlemanly thing and rolls the stone away for Rachel, whom he is instantly smitten with; the Bible says "Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud." Jacob explains that he is her cousin. She runs to tell her father Laban, who also welcomes Jacob with open arms; "he embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house." Jacob stays in Laban's house a month, and during that time Jacob tells his uncle that he is willing to serve him for *seven whole years* if Laban will give him Rachel as a wife. *Seven years!* That's a long time to be betrothed! Laban happily agrees, so "Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her." (Isn't that sweet!)

But Laban is just as tricky as Jacob is. When the day of the wedding arrives, seven years later, a very happy Jacob marries his veiled bride, but when the sun rises the next morning he realizes that the woman he has just wedded and made love with is not Rachel. It's her older sister, Leah! Jacob is furious and confronts Laban; Laban explains that it is not customary for the younger daughter to be married before the elder. (Don't you think it would have been nice if Laban had told that to Jacob *before* the wedding?!?) Laban tells Jacob he can marry Rachel at the end of the wedding festivities, *if* he will serve another seven years. Jacob consents. So he ends up serving *fourteen* years, and has two wives simultaneously. What a mess! Are we reading the Holy Bible, or watching a soap opera?!? But in and through all this family drama, God is at work, using these deeply flawed people to bring about the full restoration of the world. Don't underestimate what God can do through deeply flawed people!

Now this is going to feel like a dramatic shift. We're going from a pretty messy point in the Bible to one of its highest peaks: the majestic eighth chapter in Paul's letter to the Romans. This is one of the greatest chapters in the Bible. Paul is talking about what God ultimately brought about through that very flawed human family, hundreds upon hundreds of years later. "The sufferings of this present time," he says, "are not worth comparing with the *glory* about to be revealed to us." "Creation," he says, "will be *set free* from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the *freedom* of the *glory* of the children of God." These are the promises given to Jacob's family, brought to their ultimate fulfillment.

Let's start in verse 28. Paul says that we have been "called according to his purpose." God has a *plan* at work, a plan for the salvation of the world; God's heart is always and forever leaning in our direction. "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." "Those whom he foreknew" – he's talking about *us*; Paul is saying that God had us in mind from the very beginning, that God *knew us beforehand*, before we came into existence on this earth. "He also predestined" – that is, God had a *destiny* in mind for us beforehand; God had *decided* things about our ultimate well-being and salvation before we were conceived in our mother's womb. (By the way, the word "predestined" only occurs three times in the entire Bible, and two of those instances are right here in this passage.) "To be conformed to the image of his Son" – that is, God wants us to grow in the ways of Jesus, to become more and more like Jesus with each passing year; indeed, God *calls* us to become more and more like Jesus. If we're truly been *called* by God, this is a destiny we can't avoid; we will *want* to become more like Jesus, and we will endeavor to make happen. "In order that he might be the firstborn within a large family" – the head of our family will be none other than Jesus Christ himself. "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." "Those whom he predestined" – that's us again. "He also called" – God beckons us to leave behind our former way of life and follow in the way of Christ. "And those whom he called he also justified" – God makes us *righteous* as we follow in the way of Christ; God not only declares us to *be* righteous, regardless of our many sins, but also God inspires us towards righteousness, so that our

lives become more and more holy as we mature in the faith. “And those whom he justified he also glorified” – this is the beautiful part; Paul is still talking about us; we get to be *glorified* by God, we get to become as glorious and radiant in our soul as Christ himself was on the day when God brought him up into heaven. Think about your life; think about all the things in it that aren’t so pretty; what Paul is saying here is that when we follow in the way of Christ as God calls us to, we become *glorious*, we radiate with beauty like the most beautiful sunrise and with majesty like the most majestic sunset. Consider Jacob again, and all the sordid affairs of his life and the lives of his family members. They are hardly radiant at this point in the story – but as they grow in God’s ways they will *become* radiant!

“What then are we to say about these things?” asks Paul, rhetorically. “If God is for us, who is against us?” Nobody! Nobody that matters. For “He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, how will he not with him also give us everything else?” That is, because we follow Jesus, who is God’s greatest gift to humanity, we get to inherit all of God’s riches! “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect?” The “elect” are us, the ones chosen by God. “Who will bring any charge against” us? Well, when we follow God, *nobody* can! “It is God who justifies,” God who makes us righteous. “Who is to condemn?” Who is going to tell us that we’re not good enough? *Nobody*, not if we’re truly following Jesus. “It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” Jesus is *on our side*, so long as we are on the side of God! “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” Can anything get in the way of our receiving God’s love? “Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword” get between us and God’s love? No! “No,” says Paul, “in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us.” *More than victorious!* We get *victory* over sin and death, and *so much more!* “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” “Neither death nor life” – there’s nothing in *life* that can separate us from God’s love, and nothing in *death* either. “Nor angels, nor rulers” – by “rulers” he literally means “archons,” the chief powers in the universe from the very beginning of creation; absolutely none of those great cosmic forces can separate us from God’s love. “Nor things present, nor things to come” – nothing in this universe as it exists now, or will ever exist in the future, no matter *what* may come, can separate us from God’s love. “Nor powers” – nothing strong or mighty, not even the greatest army in the cosmos, can separate us from God’s love. “Nor height, nor depth” – nothing in the heights of the heavens, nor anything in the depths of the seas, can separate us from God’s love. “Nor anything else in all creation” – this includes everything else, and I mean absolutely *everything* else, that exists *anywhere* in this vast universe, visible or invisible – *none* of it can separate us from God’s love. Let me repeat: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Can I get an “amen”?!? This is *fabulous* news; this is one of the most *powerful* and *important* affirmations anywhere in the entire Bible. When you’re feeling down and out because of what the news has to say or because of what happened at work or because of the way someone treated you or because of the terrible tragedy that’s unfolding in your life, when you’re questioning God’s goodness, questioning God’s love for you, questioning your worth in life, questioning whether there’s any meaning or point to anything at all, come back here, to the last two verses of Romans 8: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” One more time – can I get an *amen*?

© 2023 Rev. Bill Pinches