

“For Good?”

New London UMC

Sun., July 26, 2020

Genesis 29:14-30 *The Message*; **Romans 8:26-39** *NRSV*

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As promised: we have returned to the well at Haran with a new generation of Abraham’s family. This time around Jacob meets Rachel at the well and singlehandedly rolls the stone from the well to water her sheep – instead of waiting for all the shepherds to arrive so they could work together to remove the stone and water all the sheep, thus ensuring that there would be enough water for all of them. These finer points of community life often seem to be lost on Jacob. But then he has his Uncle Laban to set him straight on how things are done around Haran. Jacob and Laban make quite a pair, don’t they? Somehow Haran does not seem big enough to hold all the trickiness that these two embody. And have you noticed how Jacob and Laban seem to size each other up, and then circle around at a distance like wrestlers waiting for the opportunity to make their move to take the other down? And how they keep doing that year after year after year. But the tension between them is not the only tension in this family. Though Leah and Rachel are sisters – they have been set up to become jealous of one another because of who is loved or unloved; and who will be able to have children, or have more children. The discord that develops between these sisters seems to echo the conflict that grew between Sarah and Hagar and their children. But at least the sisters are able to stay united in their mutual disgust over the way Laban, their father, used them to manipulate Jacob; and then continued to try to cheat them as the years went by. (If you aren’t familiar with this part of their story, I invite you to read all about it from the end of chapter 29 through chapter 31 of Genesis.) All told, I find this part of the family saga to be extremely sad.

But the story of this deeply flawed family does present a clear and compelling case for God’s ability to use even the most unlikely people to carry out God’s plans. It also tells us that if God could find a way to work with Laban, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel – then God can also find a way to work with us. And God can do so in any situation. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called to his purpose.” (*Romans 8:28 NRSV*) God can carry out God’s work with us in any situation as long as we love God. Paul doesn’t say anything about how much we have to love God, just that we need to love God. So even if it’s just a little smidge of love – God can work through that connection of love.

Of course, we might be wondering why God would choose to do so. Why does it seem like God is ALWAYS up for a challenge when it comes to working with people like Laban, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and us? . . . There is a simple, but complex, answer. It has to do with God’s boundless love. And when I say “boundless love” – I mean just that: it is a love without bounds. It is too immense to be confined. So it’s not just for some people, some of the time. It’s for all of God’s people, and all of God’s creation, all of the time.

And as Paul wrote to the Romans, there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. Not a thing. . . . Just think about that for a moment. Because that seems like a rather radical notion in a year when we have spent most of our time feeling separated from a lot of people and a lot of things we didn't *want* to be separated from – but that we have *needed* to be apart from. When we have not been able to be in the same physical space with beloved family members and friends for fear of transmitting a deadly disease. And we have not taken trips that were planned to places we wanted to go to. And we had to stop sharing meals and fellowship with others at work, at school, at church. We don't even strike up casual conversations with the people we keep crossing paths with while we're shopping in the grocery store. (And you know how awkward that is.) We have even grudgingly adapted to maintaining at least six feet of social separation. And we have learned to discern who someone is by the eyes that we see above the face mask, or their "rectangle" on Zoom. We are acutely aware of being separated in ways we have never been separated before. So right now, in our on-going state of separation, it is a powerful thing to declare that there is NOTHING that "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans 8:39 NRSV*) No pandemic. No legal ruling. No travel restriction. No work requirements. No furlough from work. No distance learning. No fear. No exhaustion. No doubt. No nightmare. No news briefing. No hoarding of toilet paper. No run on cleaning supplies. No shortage of personal protection equipment. No revised set of guidelines. No Tweet. No Facebook post. No viral video. No racist act. No privileged position. No protest. No counter protest. No executive order. No unprecedented event. No new normal. NOTHING can separate us from God's love.

Hold onto that. Hold onto that and share it with someone who says they feel like God has deserted them. Share it with someone who is struggling to find work. Share it with someone who hasn't left home for months. Share it with someone who feels their health is at risk at work. Share it with someone who has a dysfunctional family. Share it with someone who feels stigmatized because they've tested positive for COVID-19. Share it with someone who feels lonely. Share it with someone who has *not yet heard* that there is NOTHING that can separate them from God's love. Share it with someone who has *forgotten* that there is NOTHING that can separate them from God's love.

Hold onto this statement of faith in God's boundless love, and focus on your own love for God. Remember that God can use any and all things and people to work together for good. Because if God is for us – it doesn't matter who, or what, may be against us – NOTHING will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.