

Sermon – Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 11A)

Scripture Texts: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:105-112; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *We worship a God who is committed to redemption, even for the most guilty and seemingly undeserving. As we follow this God, we are called to hope for a justice that leads to the true flourishing of all.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it.
 - a. Jacob has finally gone too far
 - i. We saw last week how Jacob is, at his core, a trickster. It is in his name, it has been part of him since before birth, and it won him his brother's birth rite.
 - ii. But the usurper still wasn't satisfied, and he schemed to steal his father's blessing for his older brother. In a fairly despicable scheme, he goes to his father disguised as Esau, using Isaac's blindness to trick this dying man into giving Jacob the blessing meant for Esau.
 - iii. When the truth comes out, Isaac is horrified, and Esau is justifiably outraged. For Esau, this is the last straw, and he announces that he is going to kill his brother.
 - b. Today's reading opens at one of the lowest points in Jacob's journey.
 - i. He has had to flee for his life. In a culture where people are defined by their family and their place, Jacob has had to leave both behind.
 - ii. His mother has sent him to seek out distant relatives, but this involves a long journey across the wilderness – a journey that is very dangerous to make alone.
 - iii. Even worse, there is a spiritual unraveling happening here. Jacob's grandfather Abraham was called to this land by God and was given promises. But now Jacob is forced to walk away, to undo all the progress that Abraham had made.
 - iv. Jacob has been reduced to sleeping outside with a stone for a pillow.
 - c. But God meets Jacob even here.
 - i. I often preach about God meeting us in our places of pain and of grief and doubt, but the good news of this passage is that God also meets us in our places of failure and guilt and shame – even in the places where we have undercut and distorted the image of God within us.
 - ii. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of redemption. This God shows up in Jacob's greatest failures and reaffirms the promises made to his father and grandfather.
 - iii. Incredibly, Jacob's failures don't result in his rejection by God, but will be redeemed and woven into his story; with this God, even weaknesses can be transformed into strengths.

d. Heel-Grabber --> God-Wrestler

- i. Indeed, if we peek ahead, we see that Jacob will eventually be renamed Israel – “one who wrestles with God” – and he will eventually go on to make amends with Esau. This is what it looks like for the usurper and heel grabber to be fully redeemed. His fatal flaw is transformed into his defining strength.
- ii. Indeed, we see the process starting here in this passage. Transformation begins with humility and truth-telling – such as Jacob recognizing where his scheming has brought him. It continues with an experience of God’s unconditional love and favor, as we see here.
- iii. It doesn’t happen all at once; if you read just a little farther, you’ll see Jacob trying to scheme and bargain with God (“**IF** you do all this, **THEN** I will follow and worship you...”). But even there, Jacob is beginning to build his own relationship with God, rather than just taking advantage of the people around him.

2. Desmond Tutu and the call to Restorative Justice

a. Good news and challenge from Jacob

- i. There is good news in Jacob’s story for the guilty among us. And, as our Psalm suggests, we all need the humility to recognize our imperfections – and to let God lead us toward redemption!
- ii. But there is also a challenge in this story, particularly for those who do their best to keep to the straight and narrow.
- iii. Think of it this way: should Esau be glad that God shows up for Jacob here, and makes such lavish promises? Granted, Esau would be crossing a line if he actually killed his brother in retaliation for what Jacob had done, but is this story not a failure of much needed justice for Esau? Perhaps we need to expand our vision of divine justice.

b. Tutu’s vision of divine justice

- i. That expansion is exactly what happened to me when I had the privilege to hear Desmond Tutu speak at VU in 2004, (so much so that we later named a child for him!).
- ii. You likely know something of Tutu’s work for Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa – work that defied expectations around the world. Rather than seeing a wave of bloodshed and retribution when the Apartheid government collapsed, Tutu helped to set up a process for telling the truth about the atrocities that had been committed and for opening the door to healing and reconciliation.
- iii. Tutu’s theology is based on a recognition that we are bound together (victim and perpetrator, and witness too), and that God’s vision of justice is about more than just getting even; it is about setting things right so that all can flourish.

c. Our call to hope

- i. Tutu’s is a profoundly hopeful vision, but we do worship a God of redemption – the God who delights in bringing life and hope out of death and despair. And oh, do we need some of that hope in our world today.
- ii. Tribalism and polarization are enemies of hope. Those who hear the story of Jacob and the vision of Tutu – indeed, those who would follow the God of redemption - **must** reject the rhetoric of “deplorables” and “unhumans”. We can deeply disagree with the ideas of the other side, we can work passionately against policies that cause harm, but we cannot completely write off those with whom we disagree.

- iii. This is the point of Jesus' parable: that we are not wise or skillful enough to sort out those who are redeemable from those who are not – and that we should therefore leave that work to God. And, maybe, just maybe, we will eventually discover that nothing and no one is actually irredeemable.
- iv. This is the Christian hope, as hinted at in Jacob's story, as lived out by Desmond Tutu, and as expressed in our majestic reading from Romans. Our world is currently "subject to bondage and decay"; we are surrounded by division and brokenness – and by people who seem determined to turn away from God's love and grace. But, by holding onto hope and by working for redemption, we look forward to the day God will fully establish justice; the truth will be told, opening the way for full healing and reconciliation. And one day, we will be able to look back at even the worst moments of our lives and say: "Surely God was in this place, and I did not know it."

Amen.