

Imagining a New Reality

Part Three of “The Path of the Disciple”

Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer and invite God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, we are engaging in an act of imagination and visioning. Any time that we claim something of the prophetic vision or embrace a kingdom/kin-dom image of how we could be living in beloved community together, we are imagining a new reality.

This is a disciple’s task. We are called to see more than simply what is—not that disciples ignore the world as it is. We are not called to be “so heavenly minded that we are not earthly good”! No, we do live in the world that is. But we also hold out hope, a living, driving, motivating hope for what could be. For what is promised. We lean into the promises of God with joy and with confidence, even as we recognize how far we still must go to reach that mountaintop.

There is optimism to the disciple’s path, a destination always in mind and heart as we move through the world. These aren’t rose-colored glasses that make things look better than they are, but a certainty that the church is still a force for good in the world, that justice is still within reach as hearts and minds and behaviors are changed. And that there is a God who will bring the new reality into being in and through us and sometimes despite us. That means we work for the winning side. Just think, what could we accomplish if we were certain we wouldn’t fail? What invitations could we issue, what hope could we offer, what joy could we share if we could see the new reality God has in store for all of creation? It all begins with the ability to imagine a new reality.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Seeds in the Dirt

July 16, 2023

[Gen 25:19-34](#); [Matt 13:1-9, 18-23](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

This familiar parable can easily be interpreted, mostly because Jesus gave us the clue in our text for this week. We don't have to hunt around for meaning this time. Instead, we look for applications. Or rather we learn to live into the parable. There are many directions that we could take with this for worship this week. The theme for this part of the "Path of the Disciple" series invites us to look at potential. We are asked to imagine fruitfulness and then to work for that in the whole ministry of the church. We look for seeds— and not just at the dirt. We look for potential and not just for limitations or barriers. We move from "if only" to "see what God is doing in our midst!"

Let worship be a celebration of ministry no matter what stage of development and planning. It may be fully formed and producing fruit obvious to all, or it may be embryonic, just a seed planted and not yet grown into what it will be. Both, all, are worthy of celebrating and giving God thanks for what is happening through the labor of your hand and the investment of the Spirit. And maybe there could be a call to the seed casters who have not yet even begun, saying that God is calling and investing in you, in us, the church. Where can the seed of the word be thrown in your community, and who will join with those who are sowing those seeds of faith and of love? This would be a good week to launch something new and bless those who are working in the seed-casting ministry. Or to thank those tireless workers who continue to give of themselves to the mission of making disciples in your local context.

There is also discernment in this parable. Some soils simply won't produce the fruitfulness God requires. The decision to stop doing ministries that aren't working is one that can be stressful for a local congregation, and worship isn't really the setting for making that decision. However, worship can be a moment to bless the effort and to say thank you to those who had labored, even as you are setting aside certain programs or ministries. It can be a grace-filled moment that can help with the grief of letting go.

As we worship, we celebrate the kingdom, or the kin-dom, that is being called into being through us. What does that look like for your community? What does producing a hundred-fold of the fruit of discipleship look like? What impact will you have on your neighborhood, on the children and youth in your midst? Dream a little bit this week. But let your dreams grow from the seeds that you are planting right now. See beyond the dirt to the fruit God will bring.

PREACHING NOTES

We're talking about dirt. Maybe about insults involving dirt. OK, I guess they don't have to be taken as insults, but they sure can feel like it sometimes. Dumber than dirt. Really? So, what are you going to do when Jesus calls us dirt?

There I said it. Deal with it. Jesus calls you dirt. Granted, he didn't say you were as dumb as dirt. But there is no getting around the fact that Jesus, our Lord and our Savior, Lover of Children and searcher for little lost lambs, calls you dirt. What do you think about that? Huh? And he made fun of your ears! Or maybe it is your lack of ears. "Let anyone with ears, listen!"

Sure, you've heard the parable before. But have you ever really listened to it? Did you ever just feel it for a moment? Did you ever realize just what he was saying? This is one of those few parables that Jesus actually explains in the second part of the Gospel text. He explained it because those guys following him around didn't get it. They were stumped by it. Or maybe they were just a little offended by being called dirt and decided to call him out! Hey, you, teacher guy, what did you say? Them's fightin' words!!

OK, maybe it didn't happen like that. But they didn't get it; they had to ask for an explanation. And you've heard it before. You've read it or told it or studied it or heard it preached at you. So, you know what it is about. And it is about the fact that you are dirt!

That issue isn't really up for debate. The only question is what kind of dirt you are going to be. We get to choose our dirt-essence. Now that is pretty cool, you have to admit. It's not like real dirt gets to choose. It's just the dirt that it is. In fact, if Jesus had been trooping around northern Indiana while he told his stories, he would talk about dirt that wasn't really dirt; it was hard-packed clay. That's the kind of dirt you can't even dig in. And once you jackhammer enough of it to drop in a seed, chances are it won't grow right because it never drains, and things just rot in the ground because no one thought plant and water plants in the middle of your lawn. Or maybe he would mention the thin topsoil hiding a stratum of sand. And not the sand that yields oil gushers (we should be so lucky), but the sand that doesn't provide enough nutrients and can't hold its water any better than a leaky diaper. Or maybe he would talk about the dirt that is twisted up with so many roots it is like digging in a log pile. Or the dirt that is filled with rocks and is like digging what you thought was a flower bed only to discover a gravel pit. And then maybe he would talk about the rich, black glacier melt soil that seems to allow anything and everything to spring up when a seed comes near. There's some of that around here too.

Dirt is dirt, even though it comes in so many manifestations. But we get to choose what kind of dirt we want to be. Maybe that makes us smarter than dirt. That might have been a nicer title, come to think of it.

Smarter than dirt, because we don't have to accept the soil conditions of our soul; we can change them and adapt them and grow them if we pay attention. Because the truth is, all those categories seem to fit me, I'm ashamed to admit.

Yes, there are times when I am like a beaten-down path that can't accept another word, even a good word. Even a word from the Lord. It just bounces off the hard surface of my weariness or my stubbornness, waiting for a bird to come and eat it. I know what it means to be that path.

And yes, sometimes I am so shallow it startles even me. I take the easy route, the unthinking, clichéd route and mouth something inane about the word of the Lord. And even though it might sound good at first, there isn't any depth to it, and it doesn't sustain me or my hearers when things get difficult. I know what it means to be rocky soil.

Most often, however, I'm the weedy thorny type. I've got so many tendrils running around, it is hard to even remember what's next. Going here and there, booked solid into the next millennium, I'm rushing off to do one thing or another and then forget the whys and the wherefores. Even the good Word gets choked out of me in my busyness. I know what it means to be thorny soil.

But once in a while, by the grace of God, I can find the space, find the depth, find the growing time to let God's word take root in me and begin to show some fruit. I know what it means to be good soil.

Now, what would really be dumber than dirt would be to continue to live like that - slipping from one soil state to another. Oh, sure we have a variety of influences that cause those weaker states to take over, if we let them. But let's not let them! Let's be smarter than dirt. Let's figure out what it takes to cultivate the good soil of our souls. Let's engage in those practices that break up the stones in our rocky soil - that get rid of the hard edges, the sins we savor far too much. Let's adopt an attitude of focusing on the opportunities to hear the Word and to let it go deeper than that hard path surface; let's pay attention. And let's prioritize our lives as much as we can, so that those unessential thorns don't become such huge issues that they choke out what is really important in our lives and in our faith. And let us tend to the good soil soul, by spending time in service and worship, always listening for the Word.

Let's be smarter than dirt. Unlike Esau. OK, you can't use the phrase "dumber than dirt" without calling Esau to mind. OK, I get hungry; we all get hungry, but hungry enough to trade away your birthright? That seems a bit over the top, don't you think? And what the heck is a birthright anyway?

Good question. The simplest answer is that birthright protects the rights of the firstborn son in the cultures of the Hebrew Bible. The more complicated answer is that it is something over which Jacob and Esau have been battling since the womb. It was so bad that their mother Rebekah began to think of the release of death rather than continue to be the battlefield on which her not-yet-born sons fought for supremacy. The story says that Esau "won" and was born first, but that Jacob grabbed hold of his brother's heel so that they were born almost simultaneously. And then Jacob spent most of his early life grabbing for that heel. He didn't compete with Esau in the traditional way, by doing the same things and liking the same things but hoping to do better. No, he forged his own path, became his own man, chose his own allies even when it drove a wedge in his family.

This event captured in our text for this week wasn't simply an opportune moment that Jacob grabbed hold of, like a heel in the birth canal. No, he planned this, schemed for this, finagled for this. And he caught his brother at a weak moment, hungry from a hunting trip, his Achilles heel you might say. Jacob got Esau to sign away his right to inheritance of the family fortune. Esau was worried about the here and now, not the someday that his brother was working toward. He was focused on the dirt he was in, shallow, hard-packed, covered with the weeds of his immediate need and not thinking about the good soil he might become someday. "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

Built into both stories is the idea that you have to be able to see beyond the immediate moment, to see beyond what is so that you can claim what could be. A skill that a disciple needs to develop, and quickly,

is the ability to look beyond the immediate horizon into the future that God has in store for us all. That doesn't mean that we lose sight of the dirt upon which we stand or the dirt that we are. It means that we also hold on to the birthright that we've been given, to be good soil. Are we mixing metaphors too quickly, slipping from one story to the other willy-nilly? Perhaps. But there is a serious point here, an important truth; namely, that disciples live in the real world, but they also envision and work toward a better one. Like Jacob, disciples look past an immediate hunger and claim a promise to come. Like good soil, disciples look forward to a crop a hundred-fold. We see a harvest when others see only seeds in the dirt.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - Shine Like the Sun

July 23, 2023

[Gen 28:10-19a](#); [Matt 13:24-30, 36-43](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

As in last week's story, Jesus seems to be telling us that God is somewhat sloppy when it comes to bestowing gifts. Actually, it wasn't just Jesus—from the book of Genesis on, we find God being willing to call and equip individuals whose flaws were as obvious as their strengths. A lot of the folks God chooses wouldn't even make the first cut for our lists. That is good news for us, frankly. We are often more aware of our flaws than our strengths, too. And here are stories aplenty telling us that God still has work for us to do. God still has a place, even for the likes of us. What a gospel!

So, what are we celebrating then? Bad behavior? No, of course not. We are acknowledging and celebrating God's never-ending grace. For us and for the folks we sometimes struggle with. This is a call to keep praying for the wayward child or the difficult neighbor, even those we are led to call enemies. Not because we are lax toward sinfulness, but because we are abounding in grace and steadfast love, like the God we worship.

Are there testimonies from the life of the community of faith that could lift up this redeeming grace? Not stories about someone, but stories told by someone who can reflect on a transformed life. When we see God's grace at work, we are more in tune with how to share that grace with others.

In the same way, stories of answers to prayer can be an inspiration to keep praying, even in the face of what may seem to be a lost cause. Jesus' story of the weeds and wheat tells us that what may appear to be a lost cause to us isn't necessarily lost to grace. Let our prayers overflow for our own healing but also for the healing of the world. We might be— no, we are continually surprised at what God's grace can do and for whom. We never know who we might see shining like the sun. We are learning to imagine a new reality where even flawed humans, like ourselves, can be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

PREACHING NOTES

When she was in high school, my daughter, Maddie, was a ballroom dancer. She still dances from time to time, but not so competitively. But I remember watching an exhibition some years ago. Maddie danced the rumba with her instructor, Charles. Charles was rather tall, and Maddie was ... not. I remember when she first started there, Charles told her to look over his shoulder while they were dancing. She could hardly see his shoulder, let alone look over it. But they managed.

More than managed; they were great. If I do say so myself. She was graceful and confident and accomplished. I was blown away, to say the least. She and her mother stayed to watch more of the dancers while I ran home to get to work on Sunday's sermon, still beaming at her performance.

They danced to "I Will Follow Him," which was recorded by Little Peggy March in 1963, and then made popular again by the Whoopi Goldberg movie *Sister Act* back in 1992. In that movie, the song was turned into a quasi-religious anthem sung by the nuns at St. Katherine's Convent in San Francisco. I didn't realize it was a rumba. But then, since I'm still not clear what a rumba is, I'll just go with it. I can follow too.

It was an appropriate song for the dance. Maddie just followed Charles, and sometimes, I think Charles was following Maddie. And sometimes, I wasn't sure who was following whom. But then I didn't have to know. I just watched them dance. And I was suitably impressed. We had noticed that some of the other women had some trouble with the floor that the ballroom had laid for this event. It must have been slick in places, or uneven. There were stumbles and bobbles aplenty. Except for Maddie. Ahem. Sorry had to toss that in. She was as sure footed as a gazelle, across the uneven and treacherous ground.

That's the same kind of ground that Jacob was dancing across in our passage for this week. Wait, you are thinking quickly after such a clumsy segue. Jacob? Dancing? Dreaming perhaps, but not dancing, surely. Well, maybe not literally, but still ... go with me here.

What you need to know, or to remember, is that Jacob isn't out for a little stroll one day. He is running for his life. He cheated his brother, conspired with his mother against his father, and now is on his way to hide out with some distant relatives, who he hopes haven't been reading his brother Esau's Facebook posts.

So, he runs as far as his legs will take him and then he drops in exhaustion. And given that he wasn't really prepared for this journey, he grabs a stone for a pillow and falls asleep. And while he sleeps, he dreams. Understandable really, must be that crick in the neck he is getting from sleeping on a rock. Anyway, the dream is quite a production. One of those you don't want to wake up from. And if you do open your eyes to the reality you are living in, you shut them quickly and hope to drift back to the landscape you were just dreaming instead of the one out your window. That's the kind of dream it was.

A ladder, or staircase or ramp - the Hebrew here is a bit fuzzy. And we aren't clear whether God stands with Jacob at the top of the ladder or at the bottom. But the words come through loud and clear. "You are blessed, Jacob." And more than that, "you are not alone."

What a message to hear when you are running for your life. What a note to receive when you are sleeping with a stone for your pillow. You would think, and I'll bet he expected to hear the voice say, "Shame on you, Jacob, for being such a trickster, for being a self-centered mama's boy. You are in big

trouble now.” And maybe that’s what he should have heard. But he didn’t. He heard a different message. He heard an invitation. He heard a reminder of family, of connection.

The rabbis pointed out that before he went to sleep, Jacob took stones, plural. Our translation says one of the stones, but that’s to help it make sense to us. It really says he took stones for a pillow. So, he was sleeping on a pile of rocks. But after the dream, there is one stone under his head. So, they taught, it is the sign of the Spirit that what was many has been bound into one. The scattered pieces of Jacob’s soul have been stitched into a whole again, because of the presence and the protection of the Spirit of God. The broken dreams of a troubled man are given new hope and new life because of that visitation at night while he slept what must have been a troubled sleep.

I would like to say that everything went better for Jacob from that night on, that his act of worship transformed him into a new man. But it wouldn’t be true to the story. He still had a lot to learn; he still tried to dance his way through life and relationships, and he frequently found himself on uneven and stony ground.

But he was never alone. The promise was that he would have a dancing partner, no matter what. No matter how uneven the floor, no matter how stony the path. That’s our promise too. A dancing partner across the stony ground of our lives. What better news could there be?

Now, maybe we should try a rumba.

I will follow him, wherever he may go. There isn’t an ocean too deep, a mountain so high it can keep me away. I must follow him, ever since he touched my hand I knew. That near him I must always be. And nothing can keep him from me. He is my destiny. I will follow him.

(Songwriters: Paul Mauriat / Franck Marius Louis Pourcel / Jacques Plante / Raymond Levebfre; I Will Follow Him lyrics © Les Ed. Jacques Plante).

Watch your step there. Everybody dance.

And while we dance and dream, let’s take a moment to commend the lectionary preparers for putting this story of Jacob alongside the parable of the weeds and wheat. What a wonderful juxtaposition. Because most of us have trouble being fully supportive of Jacob’s actions and on board with the blessing that God gives him here in this story. He is something of a rogue, as we all know. We would be likely to uproot him from the story, knowing what we know of his character or lack thereof. But Jesus gives us pause. Jesus tells us to wait and reminds us that we are not equipped to see the depths of anyone’s heart.

“Let them both grow together,” he says, weeds and wheat - or weeds and flowers - or weeds and whatever else you might be growing in that garden of yours. Don’t worry about the weed patch, just let it grow. It is a free and easy kind of living, right? It is a “remove the boundaries, just let it be” kind of approach to life. It’s just the kind of thing all sorts of folks are advocating these days. So, is Jesus a “new age” thinker after all?

Well, there are a couple of things we have to take note of in this passage—important things that might change our behavior and our attitudes. First of all, this parable does not argue that there is no such thing

as sin anymore. It doesn't argue that there is no right and no wrong. The householder, when told about what has happened, when told that there are weeds in his field, says "an enemy has done this." Jesus doesn't claim that sin has disappeared. He acknowledges evil still at work in the world and in the minds and hearts of each of us and all of us. It is there, and its effects on us can be devastating. And we are in the business of trying to root it out.

That brings us to the second point of this parable: We don't always know what we are looking at. One of the problems I had when I was sent out to weed the garden as a reluctant kid was that I wasn't always sure which was weed and which was plant. I remember one time pulling out most of a row of carrots because they looked very much like the weeds I was sent to pull out. I couldn't always tell.

The truth is, we all have our blind spots. Remember the story about the speck and the plank in the eye? The point there was that we often think sins we don't have are worse than the ones we do. We are more ready to correct someone else's bad behavior than to pay much attention to our own. And in fact, at times, what we want to correct in someone else might be a difference in perspective and not sinful after all. We Christians don't have a perfect record throughout history on that one. We were sure that women weren't as valued in God's kingdom as men. We were sure that white skin was a better guarantee of entrance into heaven than black or brown or yellow or red. We were convinced that what Jesus wanted was to make everyone like citizens of the USA, or the West, or the developed world, and that cultural expressions of faith had to be uniform no matter where you lived.

Now we are embarrassed to have held these views. We couldn't always tell what was a weed and what was wheat. And the parable also tells us that even when we do know, pulling out the weed can do more damage than leaving it alone. It tells us that if hospitality is at the top of our to-do list, if loving neighbors with the same energy with which we love God is our M.O.; then our approach to sin has to be different from pointing fingers and tossing folks out.

The other clear message of this parable is that ultimate judgment is God's job and not ours. We don't know enough, we can't love enough, we won't care enough to judge rightly. It might also be argued that trying to take over God's job here is the ultimate in lack of faith. We don't think God will deal with sin in the way we would like God to do. So, we'll step in and handle it. That is arrogance that reeks of pride and self-centeredness. Instead, Jesus calls us to trust that God is still in charge. He calls us to trust that even though it appears that goodness and righteousness and living a life of love is simply a recipe for being taken advantage of in this dog-eat-dog world, God's way is still a better way to be. God's way is a more whole, more sustaining, more satisfying way to live.

That is the answer to the question, "What do we do about sin?" We live a life of righteousness in a public way so that those who have not yet found their way to God can see in us the power of Christ, the water of life welling up in springs. No, we don't just turn our backs on sin; we overpower it; we counteract it with love, not judgment. We transform, even as we are being transformed, through hospitality and grace, not hatred and exclusion. We heal, even as we are being healed, through acceptance and hope, not condemnation and exile. We tend, even as we are tended.

And here's the amazing part of the story. There will come a time when we will celebrate our hospitality, where we will embrace the grace that has been poured into us and then came forth from us. Like Jacob, we will stand before that ladder, or stairway, and see God face to face, and then we will shine like the sun. Compounding the joy will be the surprise of seeing who else is shining with us. Some of whom we

might have pulled up and tossed out just might be further along in the journey than we are, and they might smile at us and say, “You know, I once thought you were a weed in God’s Garden and wanted to pull you out. Thanks be to God, I didn’t.”

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Hidden and Mixed In

July 30, 2023

[Gen 29:15-28](#); [Matt 13:31-33, 44-52](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

We prefer the obvious. We like to be sure. But faith is something else indeed. Hebrews 11:1 reminds us that faith “is the conviction of things not seen.” Not seen? Like a treasure hidden in a field, or like yeast mixed in the flour, hidden and mixed in. That’s how grace works. So how do we find it and how do we celebrate it? By telling the stories, by pointing it out. Glory sightings, some call them. Sharing with the whole body the moments of joy and grace that we experience day by day. Often, our prayer time is one of petitions, requesting more of the Spirit in our lives or in the lives of those we love or the world as a whole. An important and necessary part of our ongoing prayer life, to be sure. But we can also give thanks and praise for all that has and is happening in our lives of faith. When we gather. it can be a time of celebration, as well as a time to grieve together and ask together, “How do we tell the story of a hidden grace or the elusive kingdom?”

One way we have of cultivating our attention to the hidden aspect of the kingdom is to sing about it or speak about it. What songs can we sing about the flower in the bud or the sun behind the cloud? What stories can we tell, alongside the stories of treasures in fields and yeast in the dough? How do we help people learn to recognize the Spirit at work in their lives? This may be something that goes beyond a worship experience. But seeds can be planted, and the intention established when we gather together each week.

What images can we provide those who gather? What pictures from the community will help us see? What artwork points us beyond ourselves to something deeper at work? How does the architecture of our buildings help us know God? What do we do in the space where we worship that draws our attention to the presence of God among us? Do we need more silence, listening for the voice of God? Do we need more voices singing God’s praises or sharing the serendipity of discovering grace in surprising places? Let the worship team think on many levels this week as we prepare to usher people into God’s presence this week.

PREACHING NOTES

We found the bolts that held the big desk together. They were tucked into a drawer of the desk. Duh. But still, I was pretty sure I had checked there. At least that is what I told my wife when she asked if I had looked there. I was sure I had. But the drawer was deeper than I realized. Or they were wedged into a back corner. Or it was magic.

Yeah, that's it. The unexplainable. There is a lot of that when you move. And we've moved a lot in my ministry, almost too many times to count. Every time, though, there are those questions that arise. "Who put that there? What happened to the whatsis? What are we going to do with these? Whose is this anyway and why didn't we get rid of it years ago?" That last one is usually about my stuff. Funny how that works.

But it is like a combination of Christmas and an Easter egg hunt. There are treasures hidden all over the place and you just gotta find them. And they are often in a place you don't expect. You open a box and wonder why you packed that item in with those things. You open a drawer and find that you had tucked in something that doesn't really belong there for safekeeping. Power cords and remotes that should have been packed with the items they power are hidden away somewhere else.

OK, it isn't like we are going to stumble across gold bars or a lost Rembrandt or anything. This is, after all, our stuff. Ordinary stuff. Stuff we know and love or have gotten used to anyway. The point here is not the value of the items, but the fact that they are hidden away in surprising places, in places we should have uncovered by now, in places that are right under our noses.

Our gospel text this week is also about what is hidden in plain sight. But what Jesus claims is right under our noses is something of incalculable value.

There was a rabbinic teaching method called "*charaz*." It means stringing pearls, and the teacher would spin out image after image, wisdom saying after wisdom saying, parable after parable in a seemingly random way. It was designed to tell a larger truth by focusing on small details or to talk about a whole by examining the parts. It was describing a picture by telling of a variety of perspectives.

I am sure that the hearers got as frustrated by this style of teaching as we do. "Which is it, Jesus" had to be the demand. Is the kingdom like a pearl or a net? Is it more like yeast or like a treasure in a field? Do we stumble across it or set out with a checklist to find it? Does it work in secret, hidden away from our eyes like yeast in the dough, or does it sprout up like a plant and provide shade and protection like a mustard shrub? Is it something common like a seed or questionable like yeast or valuable like a treasure?

All of these questions and more Jesus would answer with a smile and nod of the head and tell us that we are like scribes bringing out of the treasure something old and something new. And with furrowed brows, we would throw up our hands and grumble. When we pressed him, and shouted out, "Which is it? This or that?" He would say "yes." You know he would. With a laugh, he would say, "Yes. That's it exactly!" And he wouldn't be saying it just to be funny. He'd say it because it was the truth. He'd say it because it was the best answer. Is it a pearl or a net or a seed or a treasure hidden in a field or yeast hidden in three measures of flour? Yes, it is that exactly!! And more.

Talking to Jesus can be exhausting. You think he is out to confuse you. We keep skipping over those verses where it says he said nothing except in parables. I think we skip them because they make it sound like Jesus was just messing with us, and we don't like that. But the truth is, he really wants us to see. He really wants us to understand. We just can't do it by thinking the way we usually think.

We have to learn to look under our noses and off to the horizon at the same time. We have to learn to see the ordinary and the spectacular all together. We have to learn to experience the everyday and the once-in-a-lifetime in the same moment. We need to see deeper and trust more completely. We need to value what the world throws away and throw away what the world thinks most valuable.

In short, the kingdom asks us to turn upside down, to stretch and reach and get outside of ourselves long enough to really see the wonder of the universe in a tiny seed. But most importantly, at least it seems to me to be most important, we are supposed to do it with joy.

It is easy to get frustrated when you can't find the bolts that hold your desk together. We are inclined to blame the others in the house, who you are sure didn't take the same care that you would have taken in securing a place for them. But it is precisely these inclinations that we need to set aside. Instead, we embrace the challenge, the search, the discovery with joy and with passion.

It is the latter parables in this string of pearls that carry an emotive tag. The first are simply descriptions, reminders that there are forces at work in this world and that though it may at times seem as though God is distant and apart from us, God is in fact at work within us and around us and in the most unsuspecting of people and places. There are seeds pushing down roots, Jesus says, there is yeast raising the bread of human relationships and opportunities. "Trust me," he says, "it is there."

But then, as he gets wound up in the telling, he gives us clues about how we are to respond to this, how we are to commit ourselves to the search and the claiming. "In his joy," Jesus says about the man who finds the treasure. And the merchant sells everything else to possess this new pearl. He sets aside everything he once thought important in order to occupy this new and exciting land.

At times, settling in is tedious and time-consuming. But at other times, it is fun as we get caught up in the joy of making ourselves at home in a new place. Finding treasures we forgot we had, or rearranging the furniture of our lives so that there is room for joy in this place.

It is a choice, says Jesus, for joy or tedium. After all, who knows what else might be tucked away in the back of those drawers. Let's go and see, shall we?

One discovery in the back of a drawer somewhere is this odd marriage story from the twenty-ninth chapter of Genesis. What in the world do we do with this? And do we attempt to weave it into the pearls that Jesus shares with us in the attempt to describe the kingdom of God? The kingdom is like a man who goes to marry a wife and finds instead her sister. Yikes. This is soap opera material, don't you think? I mean, the sleight of hand that Laban plays with his daughters and future son-in-law is outrageous, to say the least. There is that simple phrase in verse 25, "when morning came, it was Leah!" Don't you hate it when that happens?

But it doesn't happen, not in the real world, apart from "reality TV" or telenovelas. One thing that becomes apparent in reading this text is that the world has changed from the patriarchal, polygamist society represented in the book of Genesis. We need to avoid easy comparisons, to be sure. Yet, if we

drill down a little deeper, there are the usual human relationship struggles, jealousy and love living side by side in this story. There is still humanness in this story, despite some of the odder elements.

Our invitation, then, is to find the treasure in the midst of the ordinary. We can look for glimpses of the kingdom alongside or even within the mundane, everyday struggles of living life in a complicated and sometimes broken world. What is declared loudly in this story is Jacob's love for Rachel and how no labor seems too onerous and no ruse too distracting from the goal of building a life together. At the same time, there is the tragedy of Leah being used and locked into a loveless marriage, and the competition between the sisters becomes painful and real. A human story, to say the least.

Esther Menn on *Working Preacher* writes:

Many in the congregation will identify with the intense emotions in this family tale of inexplicable preference, deception, competition, and jealousy. Women in particular may resonate with the feeling of being judged by their appearance, the despair due to infertility, or the ecstasy over a baby's birth, all so poignantly depicted.

(<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17/commentary-on-genesis-2915-28-5>)

What we promote when proclaiming this text is not the cultural framework within which the events take place, but that God brings hope even in admittedly messy situations. What seems inordinately muddled by human failing and machinations is ultimately redeemed by God's presence, which is often hidden and mixed into the ordinary stuff of life.