

## God's Choice

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 13:24-43

"Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place--and I did not know it!'" -- Genesis 28:16

When people say to me, as they sometimes do, that the Bible is a hodgepodge of myths and legends, I think of stories like this morning's reading from Genesis and wonder how much of the Bible its critics have actually read and how carefully they've read it.

Myths and legends are about heroes – think Ulysses or Achilles or, closer to home, Paul Bunyan or Harry Potter – and the character in the Genesis reading is closer to a scoundrel than a hero.

Jacob, you'll remember – or I hope you'll remember – was one of the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. He was one of Abraham and Sarah's grandsons, and when he and Esau were born, Jacob came out of his mother's womb grasping his brother's heel.

And that pretty much set the tone for much of Jacob's life. He was a grasper, a trickster, a manipulator, and a supplanter. That's what his Hebrew name means, in fact – the one who supplants or pulls the heel or leg of another. Jacob, although the younger of the twins, supplanted his brother Esau as the head of the clan, and he did it through a combination of manipulation and deceit. One of my clergy colleagues, who's also preaching on Jacob this morning, said that someone described him to her as a "weasel and a cheat," and that's a pretty pithy description of this unsavory character.

Jacob is not a likable sort. His crookedness and scheming eventually forced him to flee from his rightly aggrieved brother, Esau, and it is at this point in his story that today's incident at Bethel takes place.

As a fugitive from justice, Jacob dreams that the God who had led his grandfather Abraham from Mesopotamia to the west, to the land of Canaan, where Jacob now finds himself – that God will be with Jacob, to make something great of him, just as that God had promised greatness to Abraham.

"[A]ll the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

I suspect that if we'd done business with Jacob and felt the sharp end of his trickery, we would've snorted at the idea of such a person becoming God's choice for good. Not likely, we would've said. People don't change their ways any more than a leopard changes its spots, as Jeremiah observed in one of his oracles. Once the wool is dyed, the color lingers no matter how vigorously you scrub.

Those are the sorts of truths we tell ourselves about life. Our truths tend to be of the Big Box variety: we have boxes of truths about people, about religion, about God, about nature, about Democrats – about just about everything – and we take the day-to-

day experiences we have with people and politicians and our bodies and evangelicals, and we put them in the mental box we've built for that kind of truth.

And then along comes God, who takes our box of truths and turns it upside down and scatters our truths like a child delights in scattering toys. That's roughly what God did in choosing the scoundrel Jacob to be part of the great blessing to the world we call the chosen people.

Jacob is part of God's choice of us, the chosen people, and we want God's choices to conform to our expectations, and so often they don't. God makes choices we might find baffling or mystifying, and we struggle and struggle to get them to fit into our truth boxes and so often they stubbornly refuse.

I've never made any secret to any of you about my thoughts and feelings about being an American in what I consider a baffling time in our nation's history. For most of my adult life, I've felt like a stranger in a strange land, with my values, which I believe have been profoundly shaped by the Christian church, clashing up against the culturally dominant values of greed, self-absorption, self-pity, and shallowness.

A few years ago, I was talking about this with one of the communion servers in St. Giles' Cathedral, and he said that he thought that we were further ahead, in some important ways, in 1973 than we were in 2003, and I've been thinking about his comment recently as I've watched the tributes to the late first lady, Betty Ford. Perhaps you've seen some of them, too, and perhaps you've been struck, as I have been, at how different Mrs. Ford, the Republican wife of a Republican president, seemed from the Republicans in the spotlight today.

I'd forgotten that Mrs. Ford supported the Equal Rights Amendment; remember that? It seems such an obvious matter of justice to me that our national constitution would prohibit sex discrimination, but many of my Christian sisters and brothers believe otherwise. God has chosen them, just as God has chosen me, and I find myself baffled at their reasoning.

I'd also forgotten that Mrs. Ford supported the right of a woman to determine for herself whether to end a pregnancy, a legal right that has been under steady assault for more than thirty years, and I again find myself baffled that good Christian people would force a woman to bear a child against her will, especially when the man who was a partner in the pregnancy has walked away. Insisting that justice for a clump of cells that may or may not become a baby overrides justice for an abandoned woman facing poverty and abuse makes no sense to me; but God's choices in this world don't always align with my choices, and God's will can be as inscrutable to me as to anyone else.

And Mrs. Ford courageously spoke openly about her breast cancer, helping to focus our nation's attention and goodwill toward working for a cure for this frightening disease, but as some of you doubtless saw in the paper recently, the Catholic bishop of Toledo has forbidden Catholic schools and churches to continue participating in the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure because the Komen foundation might someday support stem cell research. Might? Someday? Even if I thought embryonic stem cell research was morally objectionable, which I do not, the fact that someone might do it is no reason, it seems to me, to withhold valuable resources helping real women with a real disease right now. Rather than crossing the bridge when and if the church comes to it, the bishop seems to me to be ordering people off the road even with no bridge in sight.

But God chooses instruments of grace that operate in ways very different from me, and one of the sobering realities of church life is reflected in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew's gospel.

The parable comes from a time when the earliest Christian communities were embroiled in controversy about who Jesus was and what we should do in response. Some

of his followers saw him as the Messiah; others of his followers saw his life and teachings of self-giving love as the path that we should follow in our own lives, but they did not see him as the Messiah and they saw no reason to. And the first group couldn't understand what looked to them like obtuseness. Why would you want to be a Christian if you didn't see Jesus as the Christ?

And when people feel passionately about things, their language reflects their passion, and thus we get that very difficult language in this parable about the "enemy" and "the children of the evil one" and the weeds – remember, we're talking about people here – being gathered by angels at the end of the age and being "thrown into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

It's a grisly picture, and one that most of us in the left wing of the church prefer to ignore, but this parable about the kingdom is a warning that all of us, left, right, or center, need to hear and heed. And that warning is about our attempts to decide, on God's behalf, who's in and who's not.

God's work on earth – the kingdom, as Jesus put it – is made up of a lot of people doing a lot of things in a lot of different ways. And it's God's business, at the end of time, to sort out God's work from the devil's. It isn't the case that everything that happens is God's will; our religious tradition doesn't teach that. But it's also not the case that we have a crystal clear view of what God's will is. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians, we see in a mirror dimly, and only after this life do we have the hope of seeing face to face.

And I take from Paul's words, as well as the parable of the wheat and the weeds and the story of Jacob, two lessons, which I leave with you this morning.

The first is the lesson of humility. In the struggle to see the world as God sees it and to love the world as God loves it, we always need to remember that we don't. God's perspective is vastly greater than ours, just as God's love is vastly deeper than ours, and so our judgments, however firm, need to be rendered with the awareness of our own limitations and fallibility. The truth we speak as Christians we speak in love or else we make it less truthful by mixing it with self-righteousness and hate.

And the second lesson I take from this morning's readings is a lesson of comfort, despite the blemishes on Jacob's character and despite the harsh language of Jesus' parable. The comfort I take from today's readings is the knowledge that the choices we make, however difficult and erroneous they may seem to us, are always penultimate; the ultimate choices belong to God. And the choice that matters most, as far as I can tell, is the choice that has already been made for those of us seeking to discern God's will. That was the choice that God made of each of us, to put into our hearts and minds the urge to listen, to discern, to follow, and to act on behalf of that great love, for us and for all of creation, that will not let us go. God has already chosen us; all we need to do is choose God in return. What wonderful good news.