

# PENTECOST 9

## Proper 12 - Year A

*This Bible study was written by Jessie Gutsell of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale in 2014.*

### Genesis 29:15-28

<sup>15</sup>Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” <sup>16</sup>Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup>Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful. <sup>18</sup>Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” <sup>19</sup>Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” <sup>20</sup>So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.

<sup>21</sup>Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” <sup>22</sup>So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. <sup>23</sup>But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. <sup>24</sup>(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) <sup>25</sup>When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” <sup>26</sup>Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup>Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” <sup>28</sup>Jacob did so and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

in the passage for this week. This time Jacob has met his match and finds himself tricked by his uncle Laban. Their competitive relationship continues with tales of trickery for the next few chapters in Genesis. Jacob does get what he’s promised eventually (Rachel as a wife), but not until after some complications when Laban gives his older daughter Leah instead.

### Discussion Questions

Often the experiences of Rachel and Leah are overlooked in this story. Consider their unique roles in this story. What would it feel like to be them and to be part of this conspiracy with their father?

What do you make of the imperfections of the characters in the Jacob story? Does it give you hope? Fear? Disappointment? Does it make you consider the imperfections of your peers differently to see whom God loves and chooses to make promises with?

When have you loved something so much that years felt like only a few days?

### Commentary from Jessie Gutsell

The stories of Jacob, along with the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, are part of the ancestral stories of the second part of Genesis. This particular story of Jacob and Laban’s convoluted relationship follows the first cycle of Jacob stories where his relationship to Isaac is also one filled with trickery. Jacob’s mischievous and conniving relationships could certainly lead a person to wonder about the quality of people with whom God makes promises. Along with people’s imperfections, there is also a theme of promise and fulfillment in Jacob’s stories. Both of these major themes can be seen

## Psalm 105:1-11, 45b

- <sup>1</sup> Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name; \*  
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- <sup>2</sup> Sing to him, sing praises to him, \*  
and speak of all his marvelous works.
- <sup>3</sup> Glory in his holy Name; \*  
let the hearts of those who seek  
the Lord rejoice.
- <sup>4</sup> Search for the Lord and his strength; \*  
continually seek his face.
- <sup>5</sup> Remember the marvels he has done, \*  
his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,
- <sup>6</sup> O offspring of Abraham his servant, \*  
O children of Jacob his chosen.
- <sup>7</sup> He is the Lord our God; \*  
his judgments prevail in all the world.
- <sup>8</sup> He has always been mindful of his covenant, \*  
the promise he made for a thousand  
generations:
- <sup>9</sup> The covenant he made with Abraham, \*  
the oath that he swore to Isaac,
- <sup>10</sup> Which he established as a statute for Jacob, \*  
an everlasting covenant for Israel,
- <sup>11</sup> Saying, "To you will I give the land of Canaan \*  
to be your allotted inheritance."
- <sup>45b</sup> Hallelujah!

## Discussion Questions

Ponder what God's loyalty means to you in your life. Are you aware that God has always been mindful of you and all God's creatures?

How do you seek God's face? Through your relationships? Through a spiritual practice? Consider this question and see if you can think of a new way to seek God's face this week.

What does it mean to always be mindful of something? Is there something in your life that you are constantly mindful of (e.g., your cellphone, how you look, what other people are thinking of you)? What would it feel like to practice a day of mindfulness where you tried to be mindful Christ's presence in every moment?

### Commentary from Jessie Gutsell

The fidelity and strength of God is a theme running through this week's readings, and it's especially present in this psalm. Verses 1 and 5 urge us to remember all that God has done for us. Verses 8-11 use the example of God's covenant with Israel and how God has never forgotten those promises. But another message of this psalm is that it's not just enough to remember what God has done in the past. One must search for the Lord and continually seek God's face. This is a reminder and an invitation to look for God in everything that you do. Look for Christ in each person you meet, no matter how secular or unexpected the setting. What you will find there is God's strength, God's loyalty, and an awe-inspiring, forgiving love. Even when you lapse and forget to seek God's face, remember that God has always been mindful of you.

## Romans 8:26-39

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> 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? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, or rather, who was raised, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> 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.

### Commentary from Jessie Gutsell

Paul affirms the incredible power of the love of Christ in this moving passage from Romans. Earlier in the same chapter, Paul contrasts the hope of future glory with the present suffering of our human condition. The reading for today begins with one of my favorite images in Romans: the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. How achingly true these words are. Sometimes we do feel that inner, soul-searing ache that not even the deepest sigh can convey. But here we see that God know our innermost pain. Paul urges us to recognize the depth of our human despair, but simultaneously recognize that we are not alone in our struggle. The Spirit will teach us to pray, God will make everything work together for good, and nothing will

separate us from the love of God. The rest of the passage solidifies the depth of Christ's love for us after we have fully committed to our faith. Nothing we do – not missing church too many times a week, having periods of doubt, gossiping with a friends – can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

### Discussion Questions

Think of a time when you felt the Spirit interceding for you with sighs too deep for words. When do you sense the Holy Spirit the most? Do you associate the Spirit with comfort, change and/or pain?

What do you do that makes you feel separated from the love of God in Jesus? Do the words from this passage bring you comfort?

Consider memorizing a portion of this passage – perhaps Romans 8:28 or 8:38-39. Carry these words with you throughout your day and notice the presence of God in your everyday actions.

## Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

<sup>44</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

### Commentary from Jessie Gutsell

This time of year many people are beginning to harvest vegetables from their summer gardens. I am one of those people, tending my community garden plot on the seminary campus. This spring I was struck by what it felt like to be a novice gardener, digging my hands into the soil, planting my seeds and hoping for the best. I found myself wondering, “Is this how far I should put the seed down? Are the seeds too close together? Will they grow? Will I know what it’s even supposed to look like

when it grows?” These and so many other questions flooded me as I excitedly planted my plot.

It strikes me that this is often how faith feels and what it looks like, and Jesus captures that image when he speaks of the mustard seed. Am I praying for the right things? Am I looking for God? Will I even know how to recognize the divine when I see it? Will I lose my faith just as I could easily drop and lose a small mustard seed? Will I tend my faith enough, just like you weed a garden, so that it can flourish and grow?

Having faith is risky; it’s scary, and it can feel uncharted. But it can also reap an incredible harvest – one that is richer than we could imagine.

These same questions of faith apply with the other images in the passage from Matthew – yeast and nets in the sea. We take a chance with faith, and we trust that our belief will not go unnoticed or forgotten.

### Discussion Questions

Consider the different risks you take in your own faith life – can you relate with my story about gardening?

Try finishing the sentence “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” for yourself. What other images can you think of to complete that sentence?