

8th Pentecost

July 30, 2017

You Can't Always Get What You Want

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But if you try sometimes, you might find

You get what you need The Rolling Stones

Good morning and welcome to St. Anne's, where today we have a rich and full complement of holy scripture laid before us as pure gift, and good news. From the drama of the longing of Jacob for his beloved Rachel, to the poetry of one of the most beloved of Paul's letters preaching the unconditional love of God for us, to a gospel crafted out of the deep imagination of Jesus, we are offered a variety of ways to wrap the good news of the kingdom of God around our heads—and it is hard to know where to begin. You might think a preacher might start by reading and re-reading the scripture, and I did that. And then you might imagine I would have reviewed the work of articulate and insightful theologians who have published their exegesis—that is a fancy word for explanation—and maybe I did that too, a little. But the place where I found I had to begin to hear the Word of God for today was one I have been shunning for most of my life—that is until the last 2 months—*Facebook*. That's right, I—a longtime Facebook denier—have stepped through the looking glass and into the world of social media. This has not been without fear and trepidation, and I still feel like I am a stranger in a strange land, but I did come across a gem this week—one of those things I would never have seen otherwise. My niece in Atlanta has a four year-old daughter named Jac, and I stumbled on a video of Jac running around in their kitchen ninety-to-nothing, in rapid circles, with her usual exuberance and drama. It was cute enough, but when I finally figured out how to turn on the sound (technology comes in baby steps) and realized she was acting out her version of the Rolling Stones' *You Can't Always Get What You Want*—one of my all-time favorite rock songs from 1969—it was downright

hilarious. For those of you old enough to remember, the refrain in the song, (so beautifully played for us by Stan this morning) is repetitive, and each time Jac came around to *you can't always get what you want*, her arms flew up toward the ceiling, while she was still running at top speed. Then, at the end of the refrain—*if you try sometimes, you might find, you get what you need*—she fell dramatically to the floor at the center of her circle, and put her head down pretending to wail. It took me a couple of takes to understand that she was hearing *if you **cry** sometimes, you might find, you get what you need*. And of course, any four year-old knows that a dramatic crying fit on the floor can go a long way to getting what you want, right?

So it was not too much of a stretch to think about Jac's drama while I was thinking about poor Jacob in our story from Genesis. Jacob—who you might recall, stole his brother Esau's birthright, and then on the advice of his mother Rebekah and his father Isaac, left home—not only to escape Esau's wrath—but to find a wife that was not a Cannanite. This was the journey wherein Jacob lay down to sleep with a rock for a pillow at Beer-sheeba, and had a vision of a ladder stretching up to heaven—with angels ascending and descending—and the Lord God telling him that his offspring would be as many as the grains dust of the earth, and that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. What a promise—one to match the promise to his grandfather Abraham!

Before Jacob left this place, he made a vow that if God stayed with him, giving him food and shelter and bringing him home safely to his father's house, then he would declare the Lord his God forever. Jacob then continued his journey to his trusted kinsman Laban seeking shelter and work—and eventually a wife. And oh, what a wife he found. It was love at first sight with Rachel, and Jacob wanted her with all his heart. And because he wanted Rachel so much, he was more than willing to be patient and to work for her father for *seven years* so that he could marry her. Quite a romantic story, actually—the bible describes him kissing Rachel and weeping aloud with his love for her. You can imagine these unrequited lovers stealing a few more kisses in the seven years they had to wait for their wedding. And then, Jacob learned that hard lesson: *you can't always get what you want*, when he was tricked into marrying Rachel's sister Leah, and working for *seven more years* for Rachel—because he *wanted* Rachel.

Paul's letter to the Romans might have been helpful to Jacob when he discovered he had been tricked on his wedding night with the veiled Leah. How deep his disappointment must have been; how righteous his indignation; how Jacob must have wanted to just lay down on the floor and wail like a four year old. How frustrated he must have been to have the tables turned on himself—feeling the loss of his love as deeply as his brother Esau must have felt the loss of his birthright. Even when our hearts and minds are set on what we believe to be the will of God, even when we have done everything we have been called or asked to do towards what we hope is a certain end, sometimes things just get messed up, and we don't get what we want. What Jacob wanted was Rachel. What Jacob actually *needed* to carry out God's promise was multiple wives who eventually produced 12 sons who became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. The likelihood of Rachel being able to pull that off by herself was pretty small, though after a long period of barrenness, she did birth Jacob's favorites: Benjamin and Joseph.

Life is crammed full of disappointments and failures—large and small—and as much as we try to convince ourselves otherwise, *you can't always get what you want*. We can dot all the I's and cross all the T's and somehow still fall short from goals we set and expect to achieve, many times for reasons that are totally out of our control. It is easy to *ask* why God would allow failure into our lives, but it is a hard question to answer—especially when we are living in the middle of it. Mistakes, missed opportunities, rejection, bad luck, physical illness and disability, loss and grief, can all take us to places of weakness and vulnerability—where sometimes we don't even know how to pray. Paul seems to understand this when he says that it is in this defeated place that the Spirit intercedes for us *with sighs too deep for words*. *For if God is for us, who can be against us?* God searches our hearts and fills us with the knowledge that God's firstborn incarnate has already suffered the ultimate humiliation and destruction that life can offer, and overcame it with the power of resurrection. And that means when God is for us, if God is truly with us—*within us* as promised, then there is nothing that we cannot overcome or come back from. It is God's Spirit which gives us the resilience to recognize that transformation and redemption come from what can sometimes feel like a hole in the ground—even a hole as big as a tomb. And that is good news.

Jesus is offering this same good news in the gospel today when he tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed—the smallest of all the seeds—that when it has grown from its hole in the ground can become the greatest of shrubs, so that the birds of the air come to make nests in its branches. To the 1st Century Jewish farmer, the mustard shrub was a weed, which grew fast and wild and could overcome more domesticated crops. From tiny seeds these shrubs could become nuisance plants, in contrast to the proud trees known as the powerful cedars of Lebanon, symbols of the Reign of David. Yet the mustard shrub was accessible and hospitable shelter to many birds and small animals in a hot and inhospitable climate, not unlike the community Jesus was trying to create—the kingdom Jesus was trying to describe—rare and precious not because it was built with success and power, but with scruffy accessibility to all, with humility and hospitality and love. Sometimes we only have eyes for the tall cedars of Lebanon, and when we are unable to perch in their heights, we are bereft and lost. *You can't always get what you want.* Yet by holding up the value of the mustard seed, Jesus was saying that the God who did not withhold his Son will give us everything else that he knows we need, in God's time—not necessarily on our preferred schedule. A shady accessible mustard shrub will do quite nicely, when we think about it, especially if we happen to need another seven years to get where God would have us be.

No hardship or peril or distress or nakedness or persecution will separate us from the love of Christ. Not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come. No disappointment, no mistake, no failure, no sin, no lost opportunity, no power, no height, no depth nor anything or any circumstance in all creation, will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *If you try sometimes*, (even if you **cry** sometimes like a four year old), *you get what you need.* Always. What we need above all is the love of God in our lives, and we will *always* get what we need. *Always.* And whether you hear it from the stories of the family of Abraham, or from Paul, or the Gospel of Matthew, or a four year old belting out the Rolling Stones, that is very good news, indeed. Thanks be to God. AMEN