

Covenant Word

Heaven on Earth

Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

such intimate family details in public. What she never realized was just how public she made pronouncements of their love by getting a certain softness about her eyes whenever she spoke of her beloved Clarence. It is not a difficult leap for me to imagine that for Clarence and Mary to look into one another's eyes was a bit of heaven right here on earth! Just as it was for Lamar and Hermione, my parents, and just as it is for me and Lloyd most of the time. All feels right with the world when we have that special someone by our side who fills our lives with a little more grace, a little more understanding, a little more courage, and a little more love.

Heaven on earth is what Jacob found in Rachel's eyes. You will remember that Jacob is on the run, fleeing from his family of origin because he tricked his twin brother, Esau, and his aged father, Isaac, out of Esau's inheritance. Mother, Rebekah, tells Jacob to find her brother Laban. "Laban," she says, "will help." So Jacob flees to his uncle.

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
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They moved into the city of Evergreen from the farm in Belleville so that the children could go to school. My grandmother, Mary, was one of the five children in the Farnham family. She and her twin sisters, Augusta and Aline, graduated from high school, but they were not sent to college. Why would they? They were girls destined to be homemakers. And so, still living with their parents, they gave themselves over to literature and music.

Each could sing and play the piano. After dinner each evening, the family would gather on the veranda while Mary, Augusta, and Aline would share their talents. Neighbors left their porches to gather in the yard. Evening strollers made the house a destination.

When the new school principal arrived in Evergreen – single, handsome and freshly graduated from the University of Alabama – he was made aware of the evening concerts performed by the three Farnham sisters. It wasn't long before Clarence Dannelly made it a point to stop in at the Farnham's house to hear the evening's serenade. He summoned his courage to ask the senior Farnhams if he might be allowed to walk Miss Mary the one mile into town and back in order to watch the evening train come through. Romance blossomed and they set a date for their wedding. On the day of their wedding, however, Clarence was sick with yellow fever. He waited in the front bedroom so he could rest until the groom's cue was given. Then he joined Mary under the living room archway where they took their vows. Clarence immediately returned to bed, delaying their honeymoon by weeks.

Now my Victorian grandmother would accuse me of having "no delicacy of feeling" to tell you

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Laban welcomes Jacob, and Jacob works an entire month before Laban offers any payment in return. The payment Jacob requests, however, is permission to marry Rachel, Laban's youngest daughter. Laban agrees but only if Jacob works for Laban seven years. What Laban doesn't tell Jacob is that there is a social law in their land that requires the oldest daughter to be married before the youngest can be betrothed.

Scripture clearly states that Rachel is beautiful. It is no wonder that Jacob is smitten! Leah, on the other hand, is described as having eyes that are lovely. Some translations state that her eyes are weak. My Old Testament professor, Clyde Francisco, thought this was the funniest text in all of scripture. I remember his erupting with laughter from the lectern when he referred to Leah as "old cow eyes!" The point is: she was homely. We might say, "Bless her heart! Leah has a good personality and can even make her own clothes."

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
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Jacob is so in love with Rachel that the seven years fly by. With the obligation fulfilled, a marriage feast occurs, and the union is consummated. Only to discover, in the light of the day after, that Laban, the ultimate trickster, has pulled a fast one on Jacob. The bride is not Rachel. The bride is Leah! To win the hand of Rachel, Jacob must work another seven years!

This grand deception brings a smile to my face. Jacob is finally getting what he deserves...a little pay back for all his shenanigans with Esau. "Ahhh," I think, "Here is justice for this schemer!" Then, I want to read the feminist theologians to support my concern for Leah and Rachel who appear to be mere puppets at the mercy of their father's manipulations. What must these daughters have thought of him? How this deception must have changed the dynamics between the sisters with Jacob caught in-between. But what really captures my attention most is that God is not mentioned anywhere in the text. To have been so involved previously – under the night sky with Abraham, sparing Isaac on Mt. Moriah, assuring Rebekah about her pregnancy, appearing to Jacob in a dream – where is God now at this, yet one more dramatic turn in the story?

When our luck is down, God feels incredibly slippery; vacant; far away; disinterested; remote, however you want to say it. It doesn't take much to bring divine distance: change in school; change in church; change in women's roles and for that matter, change in men's roles too; change in what is acceptable and not acceptable; who is affirmed and who is not; change in health care; change in jobs: change in neighbors; change in politics; change from divorce, illness, age, death; change, any change. At these times, heaven is illusive and it certainly can't be found on earth when our hearts are broken and our spirits are in despair; when hope vanishes and we resign ourselves to the belief that while things are changing around us all of the time, our circumstances often feel stuck and as if they will never change.

I would imagine that the crowds surrounding Jesus felt this way too. So many gathered to hear his words of hope and promise that the hillsides would fill forcing him to sit in a boat on the water so that he could tell stories about farmers and shepherds, good seed and bad seed, all the while teaching them to look for heaven in ordinary relationships, daily tasks and familiar objects.

Today's parables come quickly. There are no explanations or stories with characters to whom we may relate. There are just five flashes of the kingdom, like a power point under the supervision of someone with a

heavy hand. The kingdom of heaven is like this, this, and this. Jesus is helping us see the vast number and variety of things that the Kingdom of Heaven is like. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Seeds of Heaven," *The Seeds of Heaven*, p. 41 and 42)

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The first two comparisons are easy enough. Both a mustard seed and a bit of yeast are tiny, almost invisible, and yet, they are powerful in

their ability to grow into large, good things. The mustard seed grows into a tree large enough to shelter birds who are nesting, and the yeast results in enough bread to feed astounding numbers. Just like the mustard seed and the yeast, our tiny acts of kindness and concern often turn into larger events within the Kingdom of Heaven. Events of which we may never gain awareness or knowledge.

The next comparisons are a little more challenging because the Kingdom seems hidden...treasures in fields, merchants whose searching pays off, and fishing nets hidden in the depths of the sea. These stories remind me of the staff's experience this week. To experience some team building, we left the office to go to Lakeview's Break Out Birmingham. We were locked in a simulated laboratory for one hour where everything we needed to save the world from an evil scientist's chemical weaponry, was there in the room if we but had eyes to see. All seven of us searched diligently to uncover clues that led to keys that unlocked cabinets to gain additional information to move us ever closer to our objective. Some of us became code decipherers, some of us were adept at sequencing, and others kept looking and looking and looking again in obvious and in obscure spots that would, at last, give up some vital piece of information that led to solving our puzzle.

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This searching gave me insight into Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom. Jesus wants us to know that the Kingdom of Heaven isn't

hard to find. It doesn't require exhaustive searching because it doesn't hide in extraordinary places. No, the Kingdom of Heaven is present in the ordinary circumstances of life. It falls prey to every pirate's trick of hiding the amazing in full sight, like the silver mixed in with the stainless and the diamonds among the cubic zirconia. The extraordinary, the joyous, the amazing, mixed right in with the everyday in full sight for anyone to see if they only have eyes to see. The Kingdom of Heaven is as easy to spy as rain after a drought, a warm welcome after a long absence, holiness in the dullest of days. The Kingdom of Heaven is found in the most ordinary of people, places and activities in our lives. "If this is true," I thought to myself, "then, where have I seen the Kingdom of Heaven?"

On the way to work this past Monday, I see an African American gentleman walking down the sidewalk. I

recognize him as Mr. Calvin March, a regular helper with our Wednesday night suppers. I pull over. "I haven't seen you all summer, Mr. March," I say. "If you are heading to breakfast at the Methodist church, get in and I will drive you the rest of the way." He gets in and we talk easily about our summers until I pull up at the Methodist church. Even though it is 30 more minutes before breakfast is served, there are already over 50 men and women lined up at the door, and they all turn to stare at me and at Mr. March. Only then does silence fill the car. I finally break it by quietly saying, "Mr. March, when they ask you what you were doing in a car with me, you just say, 'my girlfriend brought me to breakfast today.'" He exploded with laughter. Hearing his laughter was experiencing the Kingdom of God right here on earth.

+ The Kingdom of Heaven is arriving at Baptist Church of the Covenant early this morning and finding brand new flip flops hanging on the Take What You Need wall. Not an item we have requested, I recognize this to be the kindness of some stranger who joins us in reaching out to our neighborhood with hope.

+ The Kingdom of Heaven is Baptist Church of the Covenant members committing to visit a nine year old boy who lives in SouthTown and is dying of leukemia.

+ The Kingdom of Heaven is Baptist Church of the Covenant volunteers working endless hours in the fellowship hall's renovation as a gift to the rest of us.

+ The Kingdom of Heaven is Baptist Church of the Covenant's mission volunteers at Terra Nova and Shalom Baptist Church being fully present to lend courage and share grace.

We have done these things and more for so long that it feels normal, what anybody would do, nothing extraordinary. But my friends, in a world full of trickery and deceit, a world that Jacob and Laban helped to create, the Kingdom of Heaven often feels far, far away, hidden from sight and unavailable. That's when we need a reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven is right here, right now, present before our very eyes in the acts of kindness offered in the name of Christ from this very place.

It is why the Romans passage holds such power. Paul Tillich says, "The mere sound of [the words from Romans 8 grasps human souls in desperate situations. They are stronger than the sound(s) of exploding mortar shells, [and] of weeping at open graves. They are stronger than the sighs of the sick or the moaning of the dying. They are

stronger than the self-accusation of those in despair. And these words prevail over the permanent whisper of anxiety we all carry around with in US." (The New Being, chapter 7) Therefore, I use these words with frequency at funerals.

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You see, it never fails that the question is

often posed to me in regards to the deceased's destination after death. It rarely comes up with the most saintly of persons, but it always shows up when suicide is involved or when there has been estrangement from the church, or if the deceased was gay. Such was the case with the funeral for Michael Clark.

Even as an adult, Michael lived with his mother. It was curse and blessing all rolled up in one, just like Isaac's relationship with Sarah...just like Jacob's relationship with Rebekah. Complicated! Entangled! Enmeshed! In fact, Michael's cremains are still in my office waiting to be placed in his mother's coffin upon her death! Complicated! Entangled! Enmeshed!

When I arrived at the house to discuss the memorial service, Michael's mother did not waste time. She wanted to know if Michael would be in heaven, because "you know, he was that way!" I looked her in the eye and replied, "I suspect that Jesus will have a harder time with Michael's sarcasm than he will have with Michael being gay!" She huffed.

So on the day of the funeral, I knew she needed assurance of her son's citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven. And I knew that Michael's friends were assembling for the same

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation – not one thing – NOTHING will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

assurance, but not about Michael. They wanted to know for themselves. They wanted to know if this preacher-girl would turn out to be like every other judging preacher they had ever heard OR was there room for them in the Kingdom of Heaven too. For that matter, is there room for any of us who have been overly judged, and that never

seem to measure up; who have messed up one time too many, and who are governed by fear that God surely loves everyone else but could never love me given all that I have said and done and thought.

So I turned to Romans 8. "What can separate us from the love of God?" I read. "Shall tribulation or distress; shall persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?" and

then I switched over to the Revised Sarah Version: “Shall gender or orientation or sexual identity separate us from the love of God?”

On the front row, Michael’s mother visibly stiffened. But the rest of the congregation leaned forward to see if the Kingdom of Heaven was truly at hand. So I continued: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation – not one thing – NOTHING will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And when we know that, my friends, and live with gratitude for it, then the Kingdom of Heaven is no longer hidden. It breaks out right here, right now, and we experience Heaven on earth. May it be so, dear Lord, may it be so, Amen.