

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 27, 2008

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

The Effect of Yeast on Bad Apples

One of my mother's favorite sayings as I was growing up was, "One bad apple spoils the whole bushel." She generally would say that when she failed to approve of some acquaintance or friend with whom I had chosen to spend my time. She would counsel me on the weakness of the flesh, and how his or her influence for ill would surely overcome any influence for good I might seek to employ. The rottenness of the bad apple in the midst of the bushel would surely spread and would eventually taint every other apple. It wasn't all that bad of advice I am sure.

Clearly Mother would not have approved my hanging out with Jacob, or most of his kin, for that matter. That was another thing that my mother drew from her adage: if one member of the family is bad, the rest are suspect. No, Jacob and family would not have received an enthusiastic welcome from my mother.

And who is to blame her? We might think after last Sunday's reading of Jacob's glorious dream, and his encounter with God, that his story would take a turn for the better. Unfortunately, it is not so. His story continues to be filled with treachery and deceit.

Of course from time to time, Jacob was on the receiving end as well.

Jacob was still running from his furious brother, Esau. His flight took him to a well, where he met a relative, Rachel. Her father was his uncle, Laban, who welcomed Jacob into his home. For awhile things went well. Jacob was given work, shelter, and food.

Laban had two daughters – Rachel and Leah the eldest. Rachel is described as graceful and beautiful, while something is said about Leah's eyes, though we do not know the meaning of the word. Some have suggested 'lovely,' others, 'weak.' We simply don't know for sure. Whichever it was, it did not impress Jacob; he was smitten by Leah's kid sister. He was so enamored with Rachel that he offered to work seven years for Laban in order to be allowed to marry Rachel at the end of the time.

Laban says something ambiguous like, "It's better that I give her to you than to any other man, stay with me." They shake hands and the deal is done.

Well, not quite.... Jacob worked hard, seven long years, though they seemed but a few days to him, because of his love for Rachel. The seven years were finished and Jacob asked for his wife. Laban threw a huge party, and then brought Leah to Jacob's tent in place of Rachel. In the darkness, dealing with the heavy veils that women wore, Jacob had no clue what was being done to him. He only discovered it in the morning light. Laban tried to justify his chicanery by claiming cultural custom: "Didn't I tell you? I certainly meant to make it clear that in our culture it would be unthinkable for the younger daughter to marry first! I thought surely you knew that."

Poor Jacob, he was stuck. Laban offered a deal. Agree to work seven more years and I will give you Rachel. So that is what Jacob

did. He worked seven more years and he and Rachel and Leah lived happily ever after.

Well, not quite.... Rachel and Leah squabbled. It was not paradise. Then the three of them, Leah, Rachel, and Jacob teamed up to trick Laban and ended up with most of his property. Eventually Rachel resorted to out and out thievery.

You must admit it is a sordid mess. One wonders why it is even in the Bible. Throughout this account God seems to be absent. These are earthy, human actions; the stuff of pulp fiction. This is not the kind of uplifting, exemplary values you expect to hear about on Sunday morning.

My mother is vindicated. The bad apple, Jacob, has ended up with a whole gang of unsavory characters. "I told you to stay away from him!"

Well, not quite.... Jesus said, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." It is kind of the bad apple theory in reverse, isn't it?

The bad apple theory is based on the premise that evil is stronger than and will overcome the good. Humanly speaking that is true as all good students of John Calvin know. Remember total depravity? We are all inclined to do ill. The Apostle Paul understood this. Even when we turn ourselves to do good, somehow we end up doing evil as Paul acknowledged.

So what is this about yeast? We are not left to ourselves – that is what it is about. God may seem absent from these sordid family stories of Jacob, but of course that is not the case. Jacob's twelve sons will become the twelve tribes of Israel. God will meet Jacob beside a brook, and Jacob will find that ultimately he is no match

for God. The yeast of God's will and design and grace will redeem this bad apple.

Paul tells us that God is so much with us that the Spirit even helps us pray. There is yeast in us, implanted in baptism, working its way in us, lifting us toward a glory we cannot see, might not recognize if we could, may not even be able to speak. The Spirit helps even our praying.

Paul goes on: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." We have tended to use this verse out of context as some kind of good luck charm. When tragedy strikes, we often hear this verse quoted with the implication that some tangible good will come out of the event; that God will turn tragedy into triumph. This verse isn't a talisman, a rabbit's foot, it is about that yeast. We have been called, baptized, justified, and will be glorified. Try stopping the yeast you put into the loaf.

That should come as good news to you this morning, both individually and as a community. The Kingdom of Heaven has come near to us in Jesus Christ. It grows among us as yeast in the loaf. There is plenty of evidence of the bad apple effect: we go wrong, we do wrong, but we have a powerful counteragent at work bringing us not to a ruined bushel of apples, but to the glory that is that of the children of God, until we ourselves and our communion become as yeast in the world.