

Discovering Faith and Community in a Pandemic
A sermon based on Romans 8:26-39 and Genesis 29:15-28
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Individualism has become endemic in North American majority culture. Our Western culture upholds the “individual who stands alone” as the ideal. In contrast, Indigenous cultures and the Hebrew culture in which the Bible emerged recognize that everyone is part of a wider web of community.

As we are experiencing the social isolation during this pandemic, we have become aware of how individualism has led to what might be considered an epidemic of loneliness. Two of the scripture readings for this week have elements of this. We will not be reading the Hebrew scripture story in worship this week, but Jacob’s story which we looked at last week, certainly has elements of loneliness, needing to succeed, and being transformed.

And Paul’s words to the disciples in Rome—people who were living their faith in the face of oppressive forces—suggest that when **aloneness** turns to loneliness and we don’t have anyone with whom to share the depths of our soul, not only does God search our heart, but the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf “with sighs too deep for words.” Paul challenges the Romans—and us!—to hear that nothing can separate us from the communion—and the community—of God’s love.

And in his own way, that is what Jacob was learning in his runaway mission to find a wife. Jacob’s story is actually pretty hilarious.

Methodist pastor Randy Quinn suggests most of us miss the humor of the story. “Some of what we miss is in the translation, for Hebrew is filled with puns that are hard to translate. Jacob, whose name means ‘grabby’ has made a life of grabbing what belongs to someone else. Now he grabs a wife only to learn in the morning [that it was not who he was expecting.]

As the younger of two sons, he had worked with his mother to acquire the benefits of being the oldest. Now he meets a man who gives him the older daughter when he wanted the younger.”¹

In those days, acquiring a wife was, unfortunately, acquiring a piece of property. Wives were bought in various ways through bridal prices that could be paid in exchange of money or other property or, as Jacob did, in return for unpaid labour. When his wedding night finally arrived, blinded by love and layers of veils and the dark of night and perhaps a lot of alcohol, he got fooled. Leah, the substituted bride, was no doubt in on the plot and agreeable to it since it got her a husband, so she likely played shy and

didn't say much in the dark. But really! How could Jacob not have known until he saw her in morning light?

Behind the humour in this story, we also hear some important reminders about what is really important in life. And it turns out that while Jacob was busy being individualistic and grabbing the best for himself, what he would eventually learn as he matured, is how important community is. He ended up having a very large family—mostly children born to Leah—and it was in this experience that he experienced God's love surrounding him. It is an important part of his faith journey.

Some people have vivid conversion stories and experiences, but those experiences do not produce an instant, mature faith.

“Faith is a growing adventure,” writes Quinn. He also suggests that “Investing in our faith is like investing in stocks. There are up times and there are down times. And if we quit every time there is a down time, we will never grow. ...If we keep our focus on the long term, our faith will mature in a healthy way.”ⁱⁱ

We invest in our faith in a variety of ways, most of which take time. We do what Jacob did while he was working for Laban. We wait. We study. We give. We work. And we marvel as the miracle of faith begins to take shape and grow in us.

I have shared with you previously about a five year period in my life, beginning my last year in University, when my faith felt non-existent. But I continued to worship, to play the organ for worship, to give my tithe, to lead the youth group without letting them know how agnostic I had become. I lived “as if” I had faith. When it returned, my beloved Mother-in-Law was dying of brain cancer and I was incubating Aimee. Somehow, miraculously, I felt a faith I had not had for five years. After walking on eggshells over and around it for a time, I became more confident of it and it has never diminished.

So, if you are in a time like that, perhaps because of COVID19 or for some other reason, I invite you to keep your heart and mind open and you will be surprised at what happens. There are many ways to do that:

- Join a Bible Study or a prayer circle. Begin a regular practice of prayer and scripture reading and devotions.
- Start the habit of making financial commitments to the ministries, the work of the church, both local (East Plains) and nationally, through The United Church of Canada's Mission and Service ministries.
- Volunteer to work with children at Messy Church or serve dinners or visit shut-ins, when we resume those things. Or phone others right now during the pandemic to check on them.
- Get involved in social justice through the Wider Work activities of our church.

There are so many things we can do to nurture our faith, even during a pandemic. With each such activity along the way, our faith begins to take shape. Over time, hopefully, we find our confidence in the love of God growing to the point that we feel like Jacob who thought the seven years of work for Rachel were like a few brief days.

What we will eventually become remains a mystery as our lives and our faith unfold. Jacob had no idea how the story of his faith would unfold, but his faith was growing as he worked for Laban. A long term transformation was taking place. From 'grabby' Jacob, he became a better person.

In this particular story Jacob was humbled by the trick played on him. He could have gotten angry and carried out some kind of revenge against his father-in-law. But he still wanted Rachel so much that he didn't. And in his humility he began to see how God was at work in his life and in his circumstances, even though the full extent of that would take generations to become clear.

Jacob invested his energy, working for Rachel's hand in marriage. He was tricked into taking Leah as well and had to keep working for Rachel. And while Leah appears to be the innocent victim in the story, it's the children of Leah who will be the ancestors of Moses and David and eventually Jesus. Think about that for a minute!

Some years ago, I learned that my paternal grandfather had married my grandmother only after her sister refused his proposal. I was troubled for years as I pondered how my grandmother must have felt, knowing she was not his first choice. It kind of reminds me of Leah's part in this story.

Thinking about Leah's story can help us get into the reading from the letter to the Romans. I wonder how many times in her marriage to the man who loved her sister, she sighed prayers without words?

So let's look at the Romans passage.

Some things in life cannot be explained in words. They need to be experienced. Any attempt to explain some things, is pale by comparison with the actual experiences themselves. Try to explain your first kiss. Oh wait. I can. It was a slobbery one in Grade 6 and was awful. Forget that. How about what it feels like to cuddle an infant? I did that yesterday, to give his sick mom a break. I am still sighing from the joy it brought me, but can I describe it? Not really. How about the smell of your kitchen after baking?

Some things just cannot be explained with words. They can be remembered, they can be felt, they can be seen. But they cannot be adequately explained.

In this Epistle reading, Paul is trying to find words to describe the love, grace, and acceptance of God. And can't. It has to be experienced. Paul acknowledges that it is

too deep for words (v 26.) Only God can reveal it to us. And God does that through the Spirit, revealing these truths to us as we are able to comprehend them. Bit by bit, little by little, until we are caught up in the immensity of it all and find our life enveloped in it.

The bottom line for Paul is that nothing can separate us from this love. Nothing at all. Nothing that God has created, nor anything that we can imagine—real or unreal. Not even ourselves. Not even COVID19.

Even when our actions bring us in direct opposition with God, as Jacob's and Laban's did, God's love and grace can bring good out of it.

Paul knew this first hand. As Saul, he had been known for his resourcefulness and resolution to destroy the people who followed the way of Jesus. But God was able to transform him and bring his gifts to bear on a new goal. His determination, his resolve, his tenacity were used by God to promote the kin-dom of God and the work of the church. His transformation was so great, that he even took a new name: Paul.

Some have suggested that without Paul, there would be no church today. Jesus may be the focus of the church's life and faith, but Paul was the one whose theology survived in the Epistles and came to greatly define Christianity.

Paul is **not** suggesting here that we no longer need to be accountable for our actions since God will work with whatever we offer. Paul is **not** inviting us to a fatalistic approach to the world and to history, though some have read that notion into this text.

Indeed, some people say that since God is going to make good happen no matter what I do (v 28), I can do whatever I want. It just doesn't matter. Paul says no way! Instead, when we allow ourselves to experience God's love, when we awaken to the kin-dom of God around us, that we experience God's grace and nothing else can change us like that.

And when tragedy strikes, whether inflicted by other persons, by ourselves, or by forces of nature—such as this pandemic—Paul says simply, "offer your life in the midst of it and allow God's grace to shine through the darkness of the moment." ⁱⁱⁱ

Easier said than done, perhaps. But many in this congregation have done it and are doing it! Ask those who are receiving regular phone calls!

To those who offer their lives to God's care and allow God's grace to shine in their lives, they begin to live with hope for the future. They begin to understand that God has not left them, but that God is suffering alongside of them. For them there is hope offered in these words, hope that transcends despair. During my worst moments during this pandemic, that is where I have found myself. Repeatedly.

Paul speaks from the experience of having been imprisoned. He speaks as one who has been literally thrown out of town. He speaks as one who has been shipwrecked and who has seen tragedy in its many forms. He knows as well as anyone that God's love transcends all that life can offer us.

Paul is also aware that this cannot be fully put into words. It is too deep for words. But that does not change his assurance and his sense of hope and promise.

The other thing this reading offers, suggests Rev. Thomas Hall in a sermon entitled "Praying When Words Fail," is a new understanding for where the Spirit is: In prayer. Paul says that the Spirit prays with sighs too deep for words and that the Spirit prays for us according to the will of God. That's something to think about^{iv}

Hall continues: "Whether armed with spontaneous words that we shoot off Pentecostal style in God's direction, or whether we are offering God a few carefully scripted words, the fact is, we need the Spirit's help. Without the Spirit's presence and assistance, we stand dumb and speechless before God; but the good news is that the Spirit stands ready to form the words that we cannot form ourselves. The Spirit prays perfectly for others through us.

Words fail. Crack under the strain of the moment, seem hollow, pointless. So often we know not what to say, much less how to pray. I must confess that as a professional pray-er, I don't know how to pray. Because I pray with vested interests. I see only the tip of the ice berg, but God sees under the deep icy waters the grotesque dangerous shape. I see the weeds, but God sees the roots. I see the symptoms, but God sees the infection. So the Spirit ... knows how to pray."^v

In conclusion, a few lines of poetry written by a new minister Sharon Carr, shortly before she died, not long after graduating from seminary.

I asked you to pray for me—
the suffering has begun, and
the skullwacking pain
is a shadow I know only too

well . . .

I wanted you to console me,
for the breadth of my grief
gnashes at me with steely
teeth, hacking and clawing at
my shreds of hope,
and stubborn strands of faith;

and then you told me the Spirit
prays for me,
that [s]he intercedes with
[God] on my behalf, ...

The tears are rolling from both our
faces, friend—
let me comfort you,
for someone in heaven has
already comforted me.^{vi}

ⁱ "Patience is a Virtue," a sermon based on Genesis 29:14a-30 by Randy L Quinn, desperatepreacher.com, accessed on 29 July 2017.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ "Too Deep for Words," a sermon based on Romans 8:26-39 by Randy L Quinn, desperatepreacher.com, accessed on 29 July 2017

^{iv} "Praying When Words Fail," a sermon based on Romans 8:26-39 by Rev. Thomas Hall, desperatepreacher.com, accessed on 29 July 2017.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Adapted from Oliver Nelson's, *Yet Life Was a Triumph* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), page 48.