

I'll Work For Your Love

It's probably not as noticeable as last week but I've titled my sermon with the name of a rock song again this week. The song in question is "I'll Work for Your Love," off of Bruce Springsteen's latest album, "Magic." Now, I've quoted here before from Springsteen's songs, which really isn't too surprising, given that I am a dyed-in-the-wool fan of "the Boss," as he is often known. It wasn't always so. Oh, like most teenagers of the era, I was deeply impressed by his first real hit, the title track of his third album, "Born to Run." And since, about that same time, I switched from listening to mostly Top 40 radio to "AOR" or "Album Oriented Rock" stations, I also listened with rapture to his long, meandering opus, "Jungleland" from that same album. I even remembered for years a tune that he released for radio only called "The Fever," which he never put on a disc until a retrospective in 1999. But I was only aware of The Boss' earlier songs through covers by Manfred Mann's Earth Band and I might have completely missed the release of his fourth album, "Darkness on the Edge of Town," but for my college roommate, Rick Reidy, who was a true Bruce Springsteen fanatic. As a result of Rick's inescapable enthusiasm, I too became a Springsteen aficionado, avidly looking forward to each new release, going to concerts when I could afford it. In fact, one of my first dates with Connie was to see Springsteen at the old Kiel Opera House in St. Louis.

I think one of the reasons that I took to Bruce Springsteen's work so wholeheartedly (and, indeed, the reason that I feel so comfortable quoting him from the pulpit) is the rich vein of Christian imagery in his lyrics. Springsteen has said very little publicly about his current faith, other than that he is a "lapsed Catholic," but the words and themes of his songs betray a deep knowledge of the Bible and its themes. From the very earliest days, the Boss' songs have spoken of sins and redemption, angels and saints, baptism and the cross. The most common name for a woman in Springsteen's songs is Mary. You can hear the influence of the Scriptures in his song titles: "Lost in the Flood," "Adam Raised a Cain," "The Promised Land," "My Father's House," which I've quoted here before, and so on.

The new song, "I'll Work for Your Love," continues this strand in Springsteen's work. Apparently a song about a man's relationship with a woman, at least one critic has suggested that it is instead Bruce's rumination on his own relationship with God. I'm not sure I buy that but it is an apt point to which we will return later. In three verses and a bridge, Springsteen manages to work in the Stations of the Cross, a halo, the crown of thorns, the book of Revelation, a rosary, a temple, perdition, the city of peace, the book of faith, a piece of the Cross, and, in a reference obscure enough that I had to look it up, the seven drops of blood which Leviticus directs a priest to sprinkle as an offering for the forgiveness of unintentional sin. But actually, none of that was the link for me between this morning's scriptures and the song. It is simply the title, repeated three times in the refrain, "I'll work for your love." It connected for me in the same way that the lovely picture on the front of the bulletin did, with the notion of Jacob patiently working those seven plus seven years for his true love's hand. And it connected me in a couple of different ways with the two brief parables that I read from our Gospel lectionary passage this morning.

So let's turn from one of rock and roll's many outlaw-heroes to one of the Bible's many outlaw-heroes. We pick up the thread of Jacob's story, as you may remember, with our protagonist on the run from his murderously angry twin, Esau. There has been strife between the brothers since before they were born – their tussling in the womb caused their mother, Rebekah, to despair of her life. Esau was born first, winning that first competition, but Jacob came out holding his

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brother's heel. When they were young men, Esau callously sold Jacob his birthright as the oldest son for a bowl of beans because he'd come home from hunting famished. In ensuing years, Esau apparently came to regret his rashness because when Jacob managed to supplant him a second time, tricking their aged, blind father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing meant for Esau, Esau flew into a rage and declared that he would kill Jacob as soon as Isaac was dead. Hearing of this, Rebekah convinced Isaac to send Jacob to her brother Laban's house to find a bride and Jacob fled under this cover story. On the road, he slept for a night at a place he named Bethel, the house of God, for he had his famous dream of angels going up and down between Earth and heaven there and there God reaffirmed the promises to him that God had made to Abraham and to Isaac.

When he arrives in the town where his uncle is living, Jacob first meets his cousin Rachel at the well, possibly the same one where his grandfather's servant met Jacob's mother and Laban's sister, Rebekah, and chose her for Isaac. Jacob shows off for Rachel with a feat of strength, as a young man will do for a pretty girl, reveals that he is her own cousin and is accepted into his uncle's household. In Laban, Jacob has met his match for shrewdness and self-interest. Laban no doubt notices the immediate attraction between his nephew and his daughter and is aware of the social custom that would match his youngest daughter with his sister's youngest son. But the young man has come without a bride price, without the rich gifts which Laban received when he sent his sister off to marry Isaac. So, when Laban asks Jacob what he will have for wages while the young man works with his uncle, Laban is likely already calculating how much work he can get out of his nephew in return for his daughter's hand.

Uncharacteristically, Jacob proposes a bargain that is not in his favor at all. The maximum bride price, according to a later text in Deuteronomy, was 50 shekels, with much lower prices being paid as a general rule. But the monthly wage of a laborer, by ancient Babylonian law, was a shekel a month. Jacob is offering to work off the equivalent of 84 shekels for Rachel, a truly generous amount.

Laban not only takes advantage of Jacob's infatuation but manages to double his profit with the infamous substitution of his eldest daughter, Leah, on the wedding night. If you are wondering how such a thing could happen, remember how Rebekah veiled herself before meeting Isaac. The custom in those days was for the bride to be veiled before the groom until the wedding was officially completed by a consummation. These days, thank goodness, all we require is a kiss for the bride to raise her veil.

For some, this must all seem like retributive justice at its finest. Just as Jacob tricked Esau into overpaying for his meal, now Laban tricks Jacob into overpaying for his bride. Just as Jacob takes advantage of the darkness of his blind father's eyes, masking his own skin with animal hides, now Laban masks his daughters with veils and takes advantage of the darkness of a tent at night. The exchange between Jacob and Laban on the morning after is particularly rich: "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?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn." Somehow, it would seem, Laban has learned of how Jacob himself has supplanted his older brother and now uses Jacob's own crime against him. "We don't do those sorts of things here, young man. My younger daughter will not steal her older sister's right to be

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married first.” When I was a teenager, incidentally, my amorous advances towards a young lady were shut down by her father, who took the Bible seriously and literally, because her older sister did not yet have a boyfriend. True story.

Those who have studied this story over the centuries have always wondered what role Leah actually played in the deception. I've read a few sermons and meditations on the question and there is even a book which has been recommended to me but that I've never read, entitled “The Red Tent,” which retells the story from the point of view of the sisters and Leah's daughter, Dinah. But on the subject of retributive justice, there is a wonderful snippet from a rabbinic text, the Genesis Rabba, which allows Leah, too, to rebuke Jacob: “All night he kept calling her "Rachel" and she kept answering him, "Yes." But "in the morning, behold! It was Leah". He said to her, "Liar and daughter-of-a-liar!" Leah answered: "Can there be a schoolmaster without any pupils? Was it not just this way that your father called out to you 'Esau' and you answered him [by saying 'Yes']? So when you called out [Rachel], I answered you the same way.”

Of course, there is more than just deserts working in this story. Despite his many faults, Jacob is still the heir to God's promises and the apparently outrageous action of Laban is worked into God's plan. Because Jacob eventually heads home with two wives rather than one (and their handmaids to boot), Israel has twelve tribes, not two (or four, if you assume that Rachel would still have given Jacob her handmaid as a surrogate). And although Rachel's sons, Joseph and Benjamin, play major roles in bringing the Children of Israel to Egypt and saving them from famine, it is a descendant of Leah's son Levi, Moses, who leads the Israelites back to the Promised Land. The Levites become the priests and Temple workers in Israel until the final destruction of the Temple. And Leah's son Judah is the forefather of the tribe that becomes the largest and most powerful among the twelve, as we remember in the words Judaea and Jew and it is from Judah that Israel got their greatest king, David, and, most significantly for us, great David's greater son, Jesus the Christ. Our God can redeem even the most unpromising situation.

But ultimately, it isn't the irony of seeing the trickster tricked or considering the significance of this story in the great sweep of the history of God's people that resonates with me this morning. It's the image of the earnest young Jacob so in love with the beautiful Rachel that he forgets his habitual shrewdness and claims her with an extravagant gift. What appeals to me about this story is its romantic nature, Jacob saying to Laban, in effect, “Your daughter is worth more than twice as much to me as any other woman has been worth to any other man.” It's what led me to put W.L. Dodge's illustration on our bulletin cover. It's a lovely if somewhat fanciful picture, with a weary Jacob leaning on his shepherd's staff, his faithful dog at his feet, the sun or perhaps the moon sinking beneath the western hills. In the middle distance, next to a ruin, is a solitary cloaked figure. Can it be Rachel, yearning for the young man who has sacrificed so much for her? Jacob seems to be staring at a sheep but surely his mind dwells on his own lovely lamb, Rachel, whose name means “ewe.” It's this single-minded and determined passion of Jacob that put me in mind of Bruce Springsteen's heartfelt pledge, “I'll work for your love, dear. I'll work for your love.” And it is in the love of Jacob for Rachel that I think we find our connection to those two little parables.

You've heard them before, no doubt. “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

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Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it." The phrase, "pearl of great price," to remember an older translation, has especially become part of the Western World's shared literary heritage, with references in a Middle English poem titled "Pearl" by the anonymous 14th Century author of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" to Dante's *Divine Comedy* to the name of Hester Prynne's daughter in *The Scarlet Letter*. Perhaps here in the west of North America the phrase is best known as the title of one of Joseph Smith's Mormon writings.

Just as you've heard the short parables and recognize phrases from them, I suspect you've all heard a sermon or two on the common interpretation of these sayings of Jesus. These two short sayings hold up as a goal for all humankind what Matthew remembers Jesus calling "the Kingdom of Heaven." It is that same blessed communion and way of life that Luke remembers as "the Kingdom of God," what Martin Luther King called "the Beloved Community," what others have called "the Wedding Banquet," or "the Party of God," or "the Realm of Love." The Kingdom of Heaven is humankind living in harmony with each other and with God, the way God has always intended for us to live. To achieve this blessed state, Jesus seems to be saying, is worth giving up anything and everything. It is worth taking up one's cross, worth losing one's life in order to find it. It is worth seven years, fourteen years, a lifetime of hard, dangerous work. Just as the Boss sings, "I'll work for your love," our pledge should be to work for the fulfillment of the Kingdom. There is nothing in the world worth as much.

Of course, as commentator Dale Bruner points out, it is curious to notice that in the parables of the treasure and pearl, it is only *after* the people run across these valuables that they become changed people who sell all they have. After all, as Paul told the Corinthians, "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..." The Good News of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God paradoxically only begins to make sense when one is willing for it to make sense. Rev. Scott Hoezee, a pastor and author from the Reformed tradition writes that this is a reminder for the Church, "that we cannot force people into the kingdom by *first* requiring them to follow a prescribed list of good deeds. Once you find the gospel, you have all the joy you need to motivate you to live a changed life. Until then, however, you won't find much motivation to follow the will of God on earth nor will the church's acting as the world's morality police bully people into the kingdom."

So the passionate love of Jacob for Rachel can be compared to the passion we are called to feel for the Kingdom of God, the realm of love in our own lives. But as Brother Paul would remind us, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Our passionate love for the Kingdom of our God and of God's Christ comes only, in the words of the old song, "because he first loved me."

The parables of Jesus rarely admit to only one simple interpretation. That is part of their power and part of the ongoing challenge for those who would follow in the way of Jesus. But it was only quite recently, perhaps five years ago, that I heard another interpretation of these two little parables in a Christmas oratorio. I was so astonished by the beauty and power of the message that I couldn't stop talking about it that day and I'm a little ashamed I don't remember the name of the oratorio or its composer. It is true that we are called to give all we have for the Kingdom of God. That is why Jesus compared the Kingdom to a hidden treasure or a pearl of great price.

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But there is another meaning, too. It is not just we who are on a treasure hunt. It is also our Loving Creator. Just as God's kingdom is a pearl beyond price for us, so are we, each and every one of us, the pearl of great price in the eyes of God.

Isn't that a wonderful realization? To know that you are the treasure for which God was and is ready to give everything? I can't imagine why this interpretation isn't more widely used; there was only one sermon in all the reading I did this week that applied it. And yet, we all know that God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. We all know that Christ Jesus emptied himself... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. If you, like me, are an Arminian in your theology rather than a Calvinist, you have perhaps considered that for humankind to have free will that God must have self-limited God's own sovereignty to make room for that human will. The Scriptures speak again and again of God's love for God's people, for the whole world and all that God created. Our hymnody sings of it: "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul! What wondrous love is this, O my soul! What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, To bear the dreadful curse for my soul." "O the deep, deep love of Jesus, Love of every love the best! 'Tis an ocean vast of blessing, 'Tis a haven sweet of rest! O the deep, deep love of Jesus, 'Tis a heaven of heavens to me; And it lifts me up to glory, For it lifts me up to Thee!" It is as if God says to us "Not only will I work for your love, I will give everything for your love."

For the last two years, I've been meeting on a regular basis with students from Fuller Seminary in small groups (and thanks to Pam and Charlie for recommending me for that opportunity). No matter what the stated nature of our meeting is to be, I always tell them one thing in particular: "There is nothing more important you can say to people than that God loves them." It is something I try to remind myself and all of you on a regular basis. God loves you, and you, and you... each and every one of us. The love of Jacob for Rachel, great though it is in the annals of human love, pales in comparison to the love God has for each of us and for each woman, man and child who has ever lived. It is the overwhelming, loving desire of God that all of God's children should come at last into the Kingdom. God does not force, God does not coerce, but God stands beside each one of us, loving us, waiting for us to reach out and accept the freely offered gift of love. When we understand ourselves to be God's beloved, when we begin to see ourselves as God's pearl of great price, that is when we can begin to love God in return, to reach our hand to meet his, to say, "Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home." For the love of God for each of us, thanks be to God!