

Surprises

Sermon notes for the sermon
Given by Rev. Dr. Gregory B. Young
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Each day we face all kinds of surprises. Sometimes they begin with an unexpected early morning phone call and our hearts race as we imagine what kind of urgent news we will receive when we answer it. There are those days when our commute to work just doesn't go according to plan: we miss the bus or train, we find ourselves in bumper-to-bumper traffic because of an accident, or, we sail into work because everyone is on vacation. There are shocking, sad, and disturbing surprises like the one we heard about in Denmark this past Friday with the killing of over ninety people by a man they say was trying to change the government. There are genuinely good surprises like the unexpected reunion of a family following a tragedy or the receipt of a letter from a long lost friend. Surprises can be good and can be bad and they always come at unexpected times and in unexpected ways.

The parables of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven are parables of surprise. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which is so tiny and yet when it sprouts it becomes a living, large bush where the birds can find safety and nesting. The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven which when mixed in with dough and baked makes the lightest and best bread. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who finds a

treasure in a field goes and sells all that he has so that he can buy the field and perhaps find more buried treasure. The Kingdom of Heaven is like when a jeweler finds the most precious and perfect pearl which he buys with his life's savings. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a group of fishermen who upon dragging their nets to shore find it filled with the catch of a lifetime.

In each of these similes something of great value is found and the resources at hand are used in an effort to possess it. The mustard seed gives way to the mustard bush which provides haven for the birds and more mustard seeds; the leaven gives way to bread to feed the family and to provide another lump of leaven for the next day's bread; both men's personal savings and wealth are used to purchase a long-sought-after prize which in turn promises to increase their wealth; the fishermen bring their once-in-a-lifetime catch to shore only to find out that some fish are kosher and others are not and must be returned to the sea, they are, however, overwhelmed with the size and value of their catch. It is almost like the television commercial that goes through a list of desired items and then ends with something like, "The smile of joy on your best friend's face, priceless." The Kingdom of God, when we experience it comes as a surprise that leaves us feeling as though nothing else of greater value can be found.

After cheating his brother Esau out of his birthright and his father, Isaac's blessing reserved for the eldest, Jacob, the second born twin runs for his life and winds up with his mother's brother, Laban. It is here, at Laban's home, that we learn how Jacob came by his crafty ways. Jacob's mother had schemed and manipulated the rivalry between Jacob and Esau – she had been told by God during her pregnancy that Jacob must be the one to bear the promise given to Abraham into the future. Rebekah planned every step to insure that Jacob, the one chosen by God, would be invested with the right and the power to carry forth the promise of a great nation. At the home of Laban we discover, along with Jacob, that scheming and craftiness run in Rebekah's family.

Jacob, the one who craftily cheated his brother Esau, now comes to find himself cheated – the supplanter is out done by an older and wiser one, his uncle. Jacob, the one who tried to beat his brother out of their mother's womb by pulling on Esau's heel, now finds the tables turned. When Jacob arrived at Laban's home and looked upon both of his daughters, Jacob saw in Rachel the love of his life – he fell in love at first sight and as they say love is blind. Jacob quickly entered into an agreement with Laban which stated that at the end of 7 year's work he would marry Rachel. Jacob was so blinded by love he forgot to read the fine print. The custom in Laban's family and tribe is that the eldest daughter must first be given in marriage.

Without telling Jacob, Laban manages to manipulate the wedding day so that Jacob marries Leah. For him to marry Rachel, Jacob must work another 7 years which he does. 14 years of Jacob's life just to marry the woman of his dreams; 14 years!

Leah and her handmaid, Zilpah, give birth to 9 sons and a daughter.

Rachael and her handmaid, Bilhah, gave birth to 3 sons, one of whom was Joseph.

The point of all of this is that the most important and precious thing we have in our lives is our relationship with God. It comes at a dear price demanding our all and it is to be protected at all cost. Our relationship with God is not just for the here and now but for the future and eternity. Prize it, cherish it, allow yourself to be permeated by it and governed by God. It comes as a surprise when we finally come to see it but then we realize it was there all along and as long as we protect it and cherish it God's Kingdom will be with us forever.