

I dread when the Jacob-Leah-Rachel-Laban story comes around in the Lectionary. There's so much wrong in how these people treat each other. Jacob's labor's exploited, the women're treated as prizes and pawns, Laban's a schemer. From a strictly storytelling standpoint, it's great. It's interesting. There's a wild twist. I went digging to see if Laban had used some clever phrasing that would make him good on his word, twisted as it was, like some kind of tricky genie or the monkey's paw, but no, he just lies. And because Jacob didn't quadruple check in the dark of that tent -- and why should he? -- he's stuck, suckered into another 7 years of bad luck. There's no lesson, no moral; it's just life. I guess if there's anything preach-able here, it's that sometimes scripture is about big, lofty moments of cosmic significance, but sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's just life. And in spite of all the awful ways people treat each other -- including significant people in God's story -- God's story continues. Not necessarily because of but in spite of them. God goes with us in spite of us.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, Paul says that. No matter where we end up, no matter who takes us there, no matter how dark the night of the soul becomes, God is with us. And God's story continuing in spite of all the evil people do in all the places people do evil is no small feat. It's one of the most comforting and most troubling concepts to wrestle with. Francis Spufford puts this brilliantly. He says,

If the God of everything *is* shining patiently in every room, then you can't escape the truth that He must be shining in some horrible places. He must be lending his uncritical sustaining power to rooms in which the vilest things are happening. There He must be, obligingly maintaining the flow of electrons through the rusty wires that are conducting 240 volts into the soft tissue of some poor screaming soul in a torture chamber. There He must be, benignly silent, as a migrant worker is raped at a truck stop. There He must be, shining contentedly away, in the overrun emergency room where the children from a crushed school bus are dying. And when you've noticed that you're ready for the next act in the emotional drama of belief ... Which is, of course, horrified disgust. (*Unapologetic*)

And that horrified disgust has to go somewhere. Horrified disgust at a character like Laban, horrified disgust at the failings of people we love, horrified disgust at leaders with no interest in honoring the care of the people they're meant to lead. "Horrified Disgust" could be the title of this era in which we fume at the paradoxically slow chipping away at our way of life unfolding at overwhelming speed.

As powers beyond our individual control rip through the way things ought to've been, as we recognize what's broken but struggle to see how little ol' we can fix it, as we flounder under exploitative authoritarian thumbs, we're left to wonder, "what can I do?" The short answer is, "I don't know." I mean, you can pray, and that's not nothing. Don't ever let the importance of prayer be taken from you. It matters, and if that's all you can do, by all means do it. And if you can do more, do more but start with prayer anyway.

Right now, it seems most are waiting for something to happen. Waiting for someone else to step up. Waiting for the midterms. Waiting for a messianic politician to save the day. Waiting for someone to make it all better. There are all sorts of reasons why people can't fix it all, but just waiting isn't going to fix any of this mess. At some point, someone has to step up. And see, I've just gone and done it, too. "Someone." I'm just another someone waiting for someone else. Jesus or a hero or a revolutionary or enough millions of voters or a politician with a spine or a judge with integrity. Or maybe just Jesus'll do. But only waiting on Jesus is a problem. If we remain patient waiting for Jesus to come back and make all things right, we're gonna keep waiting while things get worse for those we're explicitly told to care for, and then our waiting becomes a kind

of complicity. But if we wait for Jesus to come back while praying for and working towards that Kingdom of Heaven, well, we've got a chance.

Now, the Kingdom of Heaven is hard to pin down. The Bible never really defines it. Jesus says it's *like* a lot of things, but even he never gives a definition. The Kingdom of Heaven's effectively our idea of utopia complete with justice, mercy, grace, and all that theological jargon we like to toss around. None will be hungry, none will be homeless, none will be without love, none will be captive, imprisoned, cheated or broken or lambasted. And all manner of things shall be well. The definition might not be clear, but our role is clear. We work to progress this world closer to that utopic end. That's why knowing what the Bible says matters -- we need to know what we're working toward. And that's why politics and policies and enforcement matter because they shape our society, and they're shaping a society growing increasingly further from the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus may not be all that interested in telling us what the Kingdom is, but he's pretty set on getting us to do something. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed or yeast or a pearl." In each of those analogies, it's not just a thing, it's a thing that requires action. Someone plants a mustard seed, a woman mixes in yeast, someone else hides a treasure, buys a pearl, throws a net, someone specific does something specific. We may be staring at daunting systemic change, but it only takes a little bit of action with even the smallest of ingredients to make great change.

Every Sunday after the service, the question inevitably arises. "This is awful. But what can I do?" If you've asked me this, I'm not picking on you. I wonder, too. I don't know what the specifics are that YOU can do, but I know YOU can do something, no matter who you are. If praying really is all you can do, great! Do that. Paul made it abundantly clear that we've each got our own gifts as varied as the richness of souls in this place. But we're not just talking about those gifts. We're talking about what to do with them. The theologian Frederik Buechner said "Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need." I can't tell you where your deepest gladness is, but we know too well the world's deepest needs. Maybe you aren't the someone to come along and fix it all -- that's called a messiah, and we've got one of those already -- but you do have something you can do, something to bring joy to a single broken soul or kindness into cruel places or warmth into the cold, cool water into the heat, powerful words into aching hearts, a beautiful song into ears filled with hate. You probably won't change everything for everyone, but you may well change something for someone. Like a tiny bit of yeast leavening an entire batch or a mustard seed growing shelter for those on the wing, your still, small voice may be precisely the catalyst missing up 'til now. Or maybe it's not. Maybe it just brings the tiniest sliver of hope into a hopeless life or humanity into a raised fist or hesitation into a finger on a trigger.

Maybe that place where your deep gladness meets the world's deepest need is in this room, maybe it's not. Wherever it calls to you to, it calls you to love, to seek Christ, and to be a human being trying to help another human being with decency. In a world where cruelty and suspicion and cynicism and anger and lies and sadism and vindictiveness and vulgar rhetoric rule, love and kindness and heartfelt care don't just matter; they're revolutionary. So stop waiting for someone to do something. Do it.