

Lake Shore Baptist Church Sermon July 26, 2020 Charlie Fuller

Text: Genesis 29:15-28

Title: *When Life Throws You a Curve*

When I started grad school at Baylor back in the day, all grad students in music had to take a course called simply, "Musicology." It was basically an introduction to research in music. And included in the syllabus was one of those gargantuan exercises in research.

Everyone called it the "Duckles" project. And we never used that term very fondly. Vincent Duckles is the primary author of the book, "Music Reference and Research Materials." This book is a bibliography of bibliographies. It's a vast listing of music resources.

Our assignment was to take 150 or so pages of these lists and first, find which ones were in the Baylor library and second, give a description of the ones Baylor held. Doesn't sound too terribly hard, does it?

Did I tell you that this was the fall of 1979? For some of you, the earth's crust was still cooling in 1979. Did I tell you that library catalogs were not yet computerized? Did I tell you that we had to take every listing within those assigned pages and look them up in the *card catalog* and see if they were available at Baylor. For those of you too young to know what a card catalog is, let's just say it's an instrument of torture.

Here's where the story gets interesting. It turns out that the music library kept a couple of copies of Duckles on the shelf. And in those copies were inscribed the access records for each resource that was present in our library. If you had one of those copies, you could skip the card catalog altogether.

As fate would have it, our professor forgot to have those copies pulled from the shelves until a day or so had passed after the assignment was given. Some of my colleagues in the class were privy to the existence of these copies. They hurried over to the library, short-cut the assignment, and saved literally hours and hours of sorting through the card catalog.

Were these my most beloved colleagues? Not at that moment. Did they break any rules? No. Did they do anything dishonest? No. They found a crack in the process and took advantage of it.

When I was a professor, I had a course with a large project in it. It was not like the Duckles project. It had great relevance and I had former students tell me later how valuable it was to them in their careers. But I had two students one semester who simply wanted a "B" in the course. They did the math and found out they didn't even have to do that project to get their "B." I learned from that and later added this phrase to my syllabus: "No student will pass this course without passing all segments of the course."

We all remember the kids in school who stretched the rules. The quarterback who charms the teacher into letting him turn in his work late. The girl who cries to get out of a speeding ticket.

The truth is that we *all* have at least a little scoundrel in us.

Jacob goes to his ancient family homeland and meets up with Uncle Laban. Jacob's running away from trouble. He's stolen both the birthright and the blessing that rightfully belonged to his older brother, the first-born, Esau. He's run away from Esau's wrath and toward the family home to find a wife. His mother didn't like the local girls. She wanted him to go back to her ancestral home and stay with her brother while he found a wife.

When Jacob gets to Uncle Laban's house, he meets Rachel and is absolutely smitten. Scripture says Rachel was "stunningly beautiful."

Uncle Laban and Jacob strike a deal. Jacob works for seven years and he gets to marry Rachel. We have to acknowledge the terrible patriarchy of this ancient context. Certainly, Laban and Jacob haggling over Rachel like a piece of property is an ancient and terribly outdated idea. But the point of the text today is what happens next.

The wedding night comes and Laban switches the brides. Big sister Leah is taken to the marriage tent and Jacob wakes up with the wrong sister. Jacob is understandably upset with Laban, but Laban simply explains their tradition. First-born gets priority. Jacob's not going to be able to short-circuit the rules this time. He may have gotten his older brother's birthright and blessing, but he won't get Rachel – at least not yet.

This might be the original example of "what goes around, comes around." Earlier in the book of Genesis, Jacob has cheated the traditions of primogeniture, the rights of the first-born to birthright and blessing. He's stolen both from his older brother, Esau. But Laban's not going to let him get away with it again. Did Laban deceive Jacob? It seems so. But he's deceived a deceiver. It seems to be a family trait.

So, Laban says, "You can marry my Rachel. But it's going to cost you another seven years." Jacob says, "Ok. Let's get that clock started." Fourteen years. That's a long time, it seems to me. But Jacob agrees and Jacob meets his commitment.

And God keeps the promise. The one made to Jacob, his father Isaac, and his grandfather Abraham. As promised, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would indeed be the fathers of a great nation. We see some of the names of the twelve tribes of Israel in the names of Jacob's sons.

Don't we all have at least a little bit of deceiver in us? Aren't we all scoundrels at some time or another? Isn't it normal for us to look for the cracks in the system and try to take advantage? Don't we sometimes get in a hurry and look for shortcuts?

But just like Jacob, God never gives up on us. Imperfect though we be. Deceivers we are all. No exceptions. We're all broken. But God continues to love us and use us. No exceptions.

And what if what's true for individual people is true for groups of people? It was true for the nation of Israel, the descendants of Jacob. Churches, also, are nothing more than gatherings of broken people, gatherings of deceivers. We're deceiving ourselves if we think otherwise. Churches aren't perfect. Churches are muddling through, sometimes getting in a hurry, looking for shortcuts, for the cracks in the systems. Often without even knowing it.

Yet God never gives up on us. The collective "us." The "us" we call the church. God continues to love us in spite of our collective faults, our ability to hide behind each other, our ability to get hung up while on this journey we share. God's love knows no bounds. God's loving arms reach all the way around God's church even as we make our collective mistakes.

While we must dare ourselves to be better, to rise up to the call of Jesus on our collective life, we must remember that God has not given up on us. We recognize that the greater church, and our church as well, are a part of God's plan to redeem the world. Just as God never gave up on Jacob, God has not given up on us. Yet we also must recognize that we are a broken people, deeply in need of the radical love of God in Jesus Christ. We dare not avoid the difficult road required to join God on the journey of truly bringing God's presence to Waco in all the ways we're called.

In this moment, that work seems clearly to be doing the work required to purge ourselves of our white privilege. That's not easy work. It requires us to recognize that sin is not just individual, but also collective, communal, corporate, systemic. We need to confront all that we are and all that we've been through the lens of that brokenness and find those ways that God is calling us to cast off our privilege. It can't happen overnight, but that's absolutely no excuse to avoid the journey. We must take those first steps, and those second steps, and those third steps and see where and to what God is calling us as a community.

I want to challenge you to join us as you are able on our Wednesday gatherings during the next several weeks. Every other week we'll be working on white privilege and preparing ourselves to confront the specific work we need to do.

This week we'll watch and discuss a video by Bryan Stephenson, the author of "Just Mercy." Bryan Stevenson is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a human rights organization in Montgomery, Alabama. Under his leadership, EJI has won major legal challenges eliminating excessive and unfair sentencing, exonerating innocent death row prisoners, confronting abuse of the incarcerated and the mentally ill, and aiding children prosecuted as adults.

In the weeks to come our own Kathy and Steve Reid will be leading us in sessions they've titled "On the Road to Anti-Racism."

God never gives up on us, broken as we are. Let's not give up on ourselves and let's commit to doing the hard work required to be all that God has called us to be.

One of the most important statements I heard while a seminary student was this: "God can hit a mighty lick with a crooked stick."

I claim that truth for myself every single day. May we claim it for ourselves as we seek to walk this journey together.

Amen.