

*July 24, 2011*

***“Do You Get What You  
Deserve?”***

*Rev. Dr. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett*

# Do You Get What You Deserve?

Genesis 29:15-28; Romans 8:26-39;

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-45

Pent 6 A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett

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A few weeks ago in a sermon I asked the question: Do you get what you deserve? Today's texts raise that question again.

What comes to mind?

You studied hard for a test in school and you deserve an A. You worked long and creatively at your job with great results and you deserve a raise. You listened to your kid without judging and you deserve a hug and a "thanks, mom!" You shared your toys with your friend who kind of hogs them anyway, and you deserve to have your dad notice, saying, "way to share your stuff!"

Did you also think of the time when you didn't study for an exam and still got an A? How about when you threw a project together at work last minute and it came out as though it was well planned? Do you recall the time when your kid was pouring out his heart to you and you said "uh huh" and "I see" but you didn't really hear or see anything because your mind was elsewhere, and your kid thanked you for listening?

Or when you begrudgingly shared your toys and you were really mad about it, and you really wanted to smash the other kid's face in and your dad said you were a perfect angel for sharing so nicely? Did you get what you deserved?

Babies born into poverty; innocent victims of violence: Do they get what they deserve?

It's a tricky question isn't it?

Ask Jacob. He probably has some thoughts on what he deserved.

A little recap: In the book of Genesis, there is a story about a family. Snippets of this story have been in our lectionary readings in recent weeks, but large portions are left out. Jacob was the second twin born to parents Isaac and Rebekah. Esau, being the older of the twins, had certain rights and privileges that older sons got. Isaac, their father, had a soft spot in his heart for Esau the elder.

Rebekah, their mother, had a soft spot in her heart for Jacob, the younger. She developed schemes that would trick Esau out of his birthright and out of his blessing. Jacob connived with Rebekah and together in secret, they robbed Esau of what was rightfully his, causing great anguish for both Isaac and Esau.

When Esau discovered what his brother had done to him, and how he was now supposed to serve his younger brother, he was so filled with rage and anger that he vowed to kill him. Hearing of this, Rebekah whispered to Jacob that he better get out of town fast.

So off Jacob went to another country to stay with Rebekah's family. On the way there, Jacob had a dream and recognized God's presence with him on his journey, and in his life.

That was in last week's lectionary – Jacob wresting with the Angel.

The story continues. Jacob heads toward his mother's brother's place, and on the way sees the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen.

Here's the set up: Jacob is still traveling east and comes across a well in the field. There were flocks of sheep around the well. They were waiting. You see the well had a huge giant stone on it, and so

none of the sheep could be watered until all the flocks arrived at that place, then all the shepherds could work together to move that giant stone.

Jacob struck up a conversation with the shepherds to learn if they knew his uncle Laban. Indeed they did know him, and as a matter of fact, one of the shepherds is Laban's daughter Rachel. The shepherds point to her, for at that very moment, as the story is told, Rachel arrives with her father's sheep.

In Genesis 29, verse 10 it says, "Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth." Can you picture this? Jacob, AKA Superman, starts showing off for Rachel, or the sheep, or both: He single handedly pulled off the stone that takes many people to do and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Can't you just see this little wimpy guy flexing his muscles to impress Rachel?

In the meantime, Laban got the word that his nephew was in the neighborhood and came to greet him. That's where today's text comes in that you heard read.

The two men agreed upon the service Jacob would give to Laban and what the payment would be. Laban agreed to give Jacob his younger daughter in marriage after seven years service to him.

I don't know if it's true or not, but it would appear that doing seven years hard labor to gain the hand of Rachel in marriage may have been the first honest work Jacob had done! He seemed to be very clear about his goal and what he needed to do to get to that goal.

Jacob worked for seven years and then asked Laban to give him his wife Rachel. Laban threw a proper wedding for his daughter, but he tricked Jacob. Behind the wedding veil was not Rachel, but rather her older sister Leah.

Jacob did not discover it was Leah until the light of day after their marriage and wedding night. When Jacob discovered that he had been deceived, he was furious.

*Imagine that!*

His face was hot with rage as he sought out his uncle to explain his deception.

On one hand, we feel for Jacob. He fulfilled his part of the bargain by working for seven years. A deal is a deal. He didn't deserve this. He was robbed.

On the other hand, we feel Jacob got what he deserved. The one who was the deceiver in his own family, became the deceived in his new family.

This story is told by a master story teller. The irony of the details of the deception does not escape us. Jacob was the younger who robbed his older twin brother of what was rightfully his. Now Jacob was trying to marry the younger sister before the older was married, a practice that did not exist in Laban's country.

Laban took care of two problems at once: a shortage of help... and what to do with Leah, the older. I imagine Laban was rather pleased with himself for his sheer cleverness.

Laban has Jacob agree to work for him seven more years in order to gain Rachel in marriage, the woman Jacob truly loves. That he does, and after fourteen years can finally marry his favorite, the one who swept him off his feet at the well. (naturally, the text doesn't tell us how Leah and Rachel feel about all this bartering.)

Leah and Rachel then enter a child bearing contest, involving their maids as well as themselves, to see who can produce the most sons for Jacob. One of those sons born to Rachel was named Joseph.

You might remember the story of Joseph and his special coat of many colors – a sign of his father's favoritism. What did Joseph's brothers do? They sold him into slavery, watched him disappear far away to Egypt, and destroyed the symbol of Jacob's favoritism, the coat. Again, deception and trickery.

As I reflected on the sweep of this story, and the themes that run through it – such as favoritism, birth order issues, deception, running away, poor communication, and lack of forthright honest relationship – I thought about Family Systems approach to healing in families.

The concept is said best by the title of Edwin Friedman's book, Generation to Generation.<sup>i</sup> Families can keep things on an even keel for generations, even if what is being kept in balance is destructive.

You have heard me say before that when I was a young teen, I thought often to myself that I should take notes on all the bad parenting my parents inflicted on me so that I would be sure to never do what they did. This is more a reflection on my age at the time than their parenting.

How I wish I had. It would be funny reading today, since the older I get, the more I notice ways in which I am like each of them.

I am no expert in family systems therapy, but I do think the story of Isaac and Rebekah; Esau and Jacob; Jacob, Leah and Rachel; and Jacob, Rachel and Joseph is a great case study of how certain ways of functioning passed through three generations.

There was heavy-handed use of triangulation in the story. Varying combinations of two people or entities strategized against a third to manipulate an outcome.

Symptoms manifest in one family member, such as drug use, or lying, and if the family only focuses on the one person and his or her problem, then the family never has to change, and the way of functioning becomes more calcified, and assured of being transmitted to the next generation. In Family systems, one person presents symptoms, but we look elsewhere for the issues and problems that manifest in the one person.

One example of a way of functioning that can hurt a family and calcify the patterns of relating is that of secrecy, which we clearly see in the story from Genesis. Whether it's a church family, a nuclear family, or some other kind of small group, when secrets are the primary way we function together then people are put into rigid roles for relating and behaving. One has to keep track of who knows what, and one can feel superior to those who don't know the secret. The ones left out of the secret sense there is something amiss, and feel left out. Anxiety rises, which causes us to become rigid and re-active.

There was a man by the name of John Schultz, a member of the John Birch Society, living in Orange County. John and his wife had five children.

The youngest child died in a swimming pool accident, when the oldest girl was in charge of watching the children in the pool. The oldest girl, as you might imagine, felt very guilty about being in charge when her youngest brother died.

But the family didn't talk about it. Families do that sometimes. Something bad happens, and people think it will make everyone feel even worse if they talk about it, and so they don't. But because they didn't talk about it, the family became more and more rigid.

Chronic anxiety was present as they became a more brittle family. The family secret pushed everyone into rigid roles. The hinge moment when they could have prevented further tragedy was at the death of the young boy. At that moment they could have allowed everyone to talk about how they felt, expressed their remorse, guilt, sadness, thereby setting a pattern for sharing their feelings and open communication.

The father, as I said, was involved in the extremist Birch Society. One of their goals on their agenda was to eliminate sex education in schools.

The father, John Schultz, was a busy man. He was gone many nights. When the family asked where he was, he would say he was bowling, or that he was working late, or who knows what he said, but what he was *really* doing, was being the father and husband of another family. He had been having an affair with another woman and together they had two children.

Now this oldest girl, who felt very guilty about the youngest brother dying on her watch, became the “symptom bearer” for the family. She made news headlines about a decade ago: Mary Kay Letourneau

She grew up and married and had four children with her husband. You may recall that she was a teacher, and she had an affair with her student, a sixth grader, and she had two children with him.

Unable to process what was going on in her own family, she learned from her father to be absent from the family. The family had become brittle in their functioning. Family systems theory would say that the next person at high risk for this kind of behavior is Mary Kay Letourneau’s oldest child of her first family, a daughter – the daughter who shares the same position in the family as she did. Generation to generation, a sad dark secret continues to affect family members.

It would be easy to think that this adds up to pre-destination. It could sound like it means that the deck is stacked against you and there is nothing you can do. But that isn’t what Family Systems is about.

Family Systems approach gives us more helpful ways of understanding. It suggests that when one person is acting out, that we not just look at the one person. We also need to look at the other family members, the whole family or group, and ask if there are behaviors that could be modified in the family that might make it less necessary for this person to act this way.

In fact, if the person identified as having the problem were to change behavior and no longer be the problem, then another person would take on similar behavior becoming the problem, because the whole family never dealt with it. The family behavior itself can create the need for such behavior. That is true whether in nuclear family or church family or other close group.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah came out of an oral tradition passed on for many generations before it was written down. When it was written down it came from different sources that came from different perspectives. So it’s not like we have an eye-witness account of a real family. But this family is an arch-type of what family is.

This family clearly shows how people meddle and muddle and muck things up, and yet how great people and great nations grow up anyway. This story shows that people affect each other – God made us to be in relationship with one another, and sometimes you have to ask, do you get what you deserve?

You might wonder where mother Rebekah ends and son Jacob begins. She was as over-involved in his life as she was under-involved in Esau’s life. What about Laban who used his daughters as salary, pulling a switcheroo on them to solve his problems. Is there any wonder the daughters had a child bearing contest?

And isn’t it interesting that in those three generations the focus was on the youngest family member?

Well, none of this is to say that we can just blame our parents and cry that we really didn’t deserve this! It is to say that there are hopeful ways for groups of people to function who are family to each other.

The story helps us see the destruction that continues if the secrets, the power plays, the deception, the lack of communication aren’t dealt with and healed.

The prophet Jeremiah quotes a popular saying of his day when he said in chapter 31:29 – “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” But in quoting that saying, Jeremiah is speaking for God, saying that we will no longer have to repeat that proverb. Jeremiah says that God will watch over them to build and to plant, and each of us is accountable for our own sin, our own action.

True accountability for our actions comes when we are part of a family, a church, a group where we can process what's going on, where we can look at the whole picture, where we can say NO to secrets and deception, even if the motivation for doing so is nothing less than stellar.

This story reminds us that God is a God of humor and hope. Even for families where there are secrets and no good communication, God's spirit can transform brokenness to healing. God's spirit can burst forth and bring new life.

Paul's words to the Romans are water to the thirsty soul: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

Do you deserve that? Do you deserve to have God's spirit intercede for you when you have no words or thoughts? Do you deserve pure grace poured upon you when you don't even know how to ask for it?

Jesus taught that God's kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed, or like yeast that causes the bread to rise. Jesus taught that it doesn't take much – just a little for God's spirit to take hold and root and grow.

So like Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, Laban, Rachel, Leah, Joseph and so many others in our Bible, we are a deserving people! What we probably deserve is a swift kick to the back side for our own recalcitrance or a thump on the head for our denseness.

But praise be to God: a God of love, a God of hope, a God of life and vitality, we don't always get what we deserve. God's gifts of life and wholeness and hope are not given to any of us because we deserve it.

God's gifts are not given because *anyone* deserves it. God's gifts are given because it is God's nature to give, it is God's nature to care, it is God's nature to embrace a conniving Rebekah and a scheming Jacob and bless their lives in spite of themselves.

It is God's nature to transform brokenness to wholeness and to birth whole nations from feuding brothers and competitive sisters. God does not give up on us. God seeks the welfare and well being of all God's people and God's creation.

Broken as we are, muddled as we are, entrapped as we are in systems of our own making, God calls us forward. God offers transformation of what is broken to wholeness.

It can start with something as small as a mustard seed or yeast, and will grow to fullness and wholeness.

That is hope. That is amazing.

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<sup>i</sup> 1985, The Guilford Press

The story of the Schultz/Letourneau family is drawn from an account by Dr. Emily Click, Director of Field Education (formerly at CST) as well as numerous on line articles.