

Before Josh and I got married, we had several showers, as is tradition. We each had a church wedding shower, a family shower and then our friends threw us a shower. The friend shower was for us together and probably the most memorable. It was filled with seminary students and we did the classic shower game where we answered questions separately and had to guess the proper answer. One such question stands out from 17 years ago, what was my biggest pet peeve? I answered and it was not what Josh wrote down. His answer, bad theology. My answer, I couldn't possibly remember my answer because he was right. My biggest pet peeve is bad theology. Why? Because bad theology can hurt us and our relationship with God and each other.

This was just a couple of years after the Prayer of Jabez was popular and found its way in churches. The prayer that Jabez offered in 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles chapter 4 is a good prayer. The problem becomes when we think of prayer as our wish list that we ask Santa to supply. Or as Benny Hinn's nephew has suggested that God was a cosmic banker or magic genie. When we take a verse or two and take it out of the story of God we have a problem. As we have been studying this summer, we know God is at work in creation and in our lives. God has been at work from the beginning. But as we know from our study that God's actions are not him pulling strings like we are puppets. And yet we have a biblical story of Jacob who becomes prosperous.

We've been following this promise – first given to Abraham and then to Isaac and is now being fulfilled in Jacob. Not just 1 or 2 children as Abraham & Isaac had but 13 children; not just 1 wife but 4 wives; and not just animals to support their family but a vast fortune. This prosperous good life was provided by God but not just handed to him on a silver platter. Jacob turned to God for wisdom and then he worked hard for 20 years. Jacob first worked, for his wife Rachel, only to be given Leah and then an additional 7 years for Rachel. Then he worked another 6 years in our story today as he makes a way to go home. Jacob planned &

prepared to he could go home. He wanted to make it right (and we'll learn more about this part of his story to come) with Esau and return to the promised land.

But the promise of prosperity that God was now fulfilling in Jacob began with faithfulness, but it was not Abraham's faithfulness but God's. Do we remember when God promised and Abram didn't quite believe? God kept working in and through Abraham until he was faithful without question. God continually chooses imperfect people to work with. We have chronicled the ways in which Jacob was not living his best life. And God kept working, not because of anything Jacob did or didn't do but because God was faithful.

The danger of modern prosperity theology is that the blessing that is to come because we ask for it and will receive it. It's about us believing and trusting in what we want AND it's just for us. Kind of like we are the favorite child who gets everything. Perhaps like Dudley Dursley in the Harry Potter series, where he gets whatever he wants, even if he doesn't need it or will use it. This is not God's prosperity. The promises God made to Abraham of children, more than he could count & land that was fertile – Abraham didn't live to see it fulfilled. He never saw all the great grandchildren. But the faithfulness that Abraham lived was not because it was to fulfill what had been promised. Abraham was faithful because he believed & trusted God. Jacob wanted to go home – the prosperity he received was a way to provide for the family of God, the children & wives. Jacob was finding a way to go home and worked to make that happen.

As children of God and disciples of Jesus, we believe that the call in our lives is to live faithfully but that living is never just for us. Jesus showed us the way, the truth and the life is a path that requires service, humility and generosity. As United Methodist, John Wesley gave us a pattern of practice to help us grow in the knowledge & love of God. The Means of Grace is the way in which

we grow. These are the works of piety and the works of mercy than when used together shape us and form us throughout our entire lives. The works of piety prayer, worship, studying scripture, communion, and accountability are the ways we grow in interior ways. This work compels us to live outwardly as we use the works of mercy as we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick & imprisoned and work for the common good. Think of it as the waves at the ocean where it comes on shore and then goes back again. This ebb & flow rhythm shapes us as disciples of Jesus. What we do is never entirely about us. Our focus should simultaneously be inward AND outward so that we can love God with our heart, our mind, our soul & our strength as we love our neighbor as ourselves. The idea that God blesses us so that we don't have to work and can enjoy the "good life" is not biblical. The lavishness that many aspire to is not rooted in the prosperity that God shows through Jacob's life. May we be grounded in the love of God in all that we do, so that God may work in and through us to extend that love. May we live as those who are God's hands and feet. "Because loving puts us on our knees, serving as though we are slaves, this is the way we should live with you." In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.is