

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 16, 2023  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Auburn, NY  
Rev. Steven W. Plank

“If God Can Work Through *Them*...”

Text: Genesis 25:31 – “Jacob said, ‘First sell me your birthright.’”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
Genesis 25:19-34

Proposition: Some of the greatest of the biblical figures of faith were awfully fallible human beings. Yet, “If God Can Work Through *Them*,” there’s hope and encouragement for how God can – and does – work through the likes of us.

Prayer for Illumination: Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It was April 11, 2009. On the television show, *Britain’s Got Talent*, a frumpy older woman walked onto the stage. People chuckled. The judges rolled their eyes. Clearly the show’s producers had sent this woman on stage to be the comic relief. When asked about her hometown in Scotland, she couldn’t think of the word “villages” when she was trying to explain the closely gathered small towns from which she came. She was unemployed, 47 years old, had gray hair, dark eyebrows that almost met in the middle of her forehead, said she’d never in her life been on a date. But then... oh, but then she opened her mouth and began to sing. The audience was hushed as her voice filled the room. “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Miserables* had seldom been sung with such power, such wonder, such feeling. When she was done, the audience spontaneously erupted in a standing ovation. Susan Boyle had taken a disrespectful audience and rude, cynical judges, and won them – and the world – over with her voice. No one ever would have guessed that she was capable of such amazing, beautiful sounds, and she shamed everyone who had harshly judged her simply by how she looked. If by some slim chance you haven’t seen it yet, the clip of Susan singing is all over the internet, and it’s worth watching, again and again, just as a reminder of what people can do, even when no one expects anything from them.

It was May 18, 1860. The still relatively new political party, the Republican Party, was holding its convention in Chicago, Illinois, and was getting ready to take the first ballot to choose the Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States. Times were tense.

Rumors of insurrection and even states seceding from the nation were running rampant. The young country was still wet behind the ears in terms of anything that would give it perspective on how to handle such looming crises. It needed strong, wise, brave leadership.

There were four candidates up for nomination in Chicago. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin describes three of them in these words:

“William Henry Seward had been a celebrated senator from New York for more than a decade and governor of his state for two terms before he went to Washington. (*Incidentally, his home, as you know, is very close by, approximately 384 feet from where we are right now, according to Google Maps.*) Ohio’s Salmon P. Chase, too, had been both senator and governor, and had played a central role in the formation of the national Republican Party. Edward Bates was a widely respected elder statesman, a delegate to the convention that had framed the Missouri Constitution, and a former congressman whose opinions on national matters were still widely sought.”<sup>1</sup>

The other contender for the nomination, of course, was a young, backwoods, country lawyer by the name of Abraham Lincoln. He had served in the House of Representatives for one term. He had lost two races for the United States Senate. His main political strategy at the convention? Don’t make anyone mad, and wait for the other candidates to beat each other up. He succeeded at the convention, and, it goes without saying, he succeeded at what surely has been the most difficult presidential challenge any of the other 45 presidents of our country have faced. Looking at Lincoln and at his career, no one would have guessed what he was going to accomplish.

The Bible is filled with unlikely heroes and heroines, people whom the world thought uneducated or unworthy, but whom God chose to use in amazing ways. Just look at our Old Testament lesson this morning. The founding couple of the people of God, Abraham and Sarah, had a son named Isaac, who married a woman named Rebekah. Rebekah was pregnant with what turned out to be twins. From the very beginning, one of the twins, Jacob, appeared to be deceitful. In fact his name means, “he who supplants,” the dictionary definition of which means “to usurp, especially through intrigue or underhanded tactics,” “to overthrow,” “to take the place of, by trickery or force,” or “to trip up.” From the biblical account of his birth, Jacob was living into the reality of his name. The lesson continues the story when the boys had grown and Esau, who had been hunting to provide food for the family, apparently came home empty-handed. He came in to the house and asked his twin brother, Jacob, if he wouldn’t share with him the stew that Jacob had been cooking. Filled with anything but brotherly compassion, Jacob decided he’d seize the opportunity and try to steal Esau’s inheritance rights as the first-born son. This was not insignificant. In biblical times the first-born son received everything in inheritance; other siblings got nothing. “First sell me your birthright,” Jacob sneered. What kind of brother would do that? For that matter, what kind of human being would so heartlessly take advantage of someone – *anyone* else – in that way? But Jacob did.

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<sup>1</sup>Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 10. *Comment added.*

Yet Jacob goes on to become the founder, through his sons and grandsons, of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. In fact, after his encounter with God one night and his subsequent reconciliation with Esau, Jacob's name is changed to Israel, from which is derived the name of that nation to this day some 3,800 years after his life! God used Jacob in amazing ways. God used *Jacob*, who started out life as a deceitful, underhanded, morally bankrupt individual, in amazing ways. Wow! If God could use *him*...

Perhaps surprisingly, Jacob is not an atypical representation of the people that God chooses to use for divine purposes. Abraham's wife, Sarah, laughed with derision when told of the promise of descendants to her and her husband when both of them were old. King David was an adulterer and murderer, who used his own political power to satisfy his lustful appetites, and then tried to cover up what he had done. The prophet, Amos, operated a tree farm when God called him to be spokesperson of God's word to the people of Israel. Mary was a young, teenage girl from a small, obscure village when she received a heavenly vision and an intimidating promise that she would give birth to the long-promised Messiah. Peter was an uneducated fisherman who denied even knowing Jesus, yet became the leader of the earliest Christians. Paul even persecuted the followers of the Christ whom he would ultimately come to serve in so many astounding ways, founding communities of faith throughout the Middle East and Asia Minor.

If God could use folks such as these – people like Sarah, David, Amos, Mary, Peter, and Paul... "If God Can Work Through *Them*," then just maybe God can work through you... through me... through us together.

A couple of weeks ago, you met as a congregation and elected ten people to serve as a Pastor Nominating Committee, tasked with the daunting challenge of discerning who God might be calling to serve as your next pastoral leader. Can God do this by working through Elizabeth, Eli, Jill, George, Thomas, Audrey, Amy, Brian, Lilyana, and Sarah? As you pray for them in their work, and as they grow together as a discerning body, you can trust well that God will work through them! And "If God Can Work Through *Them*," then just maybe God can work through you... through me... through us together.

In just 16 days, the Rev. Dr. Stacy Smith will begin her short-term ministry here as your Temporary Pastor. In her short introduction via the Presbytery's weekly newsletter, she notes that she "loved meeting with several church members, and enjoyed a rich conversation with Rev. Patrick about the work and worship of your community." Can God work through this person who does not know you yet and whom you do not know at all yet as she works with and leads you through the next few months of life and ministry? Can God work through her in your midst? As you pray for Stacy, as you open yourself to her ideas and leadership, as you share your own gifts for ministry with her, you can trust well that God will work through her! And "If God Can Work Through *Her*," then just maybe God can work through you... through me... through us together.

“If God Can Work Though *Them*,” whoever “them” are, then you can believe – you can *believe* – that God can work through *you*, using *you*, wherever *you* are, no matter what *you* have experienced, with whatever gifts *you* have, to share love, offer friendship, heal hurts, show compassion, speak out for justice, and give hope to people, to your community, to a world in need of those things and so much more. Thanks be to God! **AMEN!**