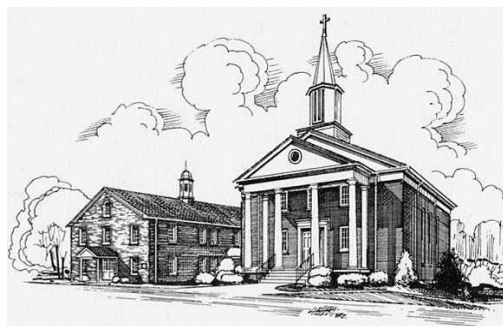


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday Closest to June 15



Proper 10

Year A

RCL

Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

The Collect

The Collect

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Genesis 25:19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger."

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body

like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau

despised his birthright.

Lucerna pedibus meis

105 Your word is a lantern to my feet *
and a light upon my path.

106 I have sworn and am determined *
to keep your righteous judgments.

107 I am deeply troubled; *
preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.

108 Accept, O LORD, the willing tribute of my lips, *
and teach me your judgments.

109 My life is always in my hand, *
yet I do not forget your law.

110 O The wicked have set a trap for me, *
but I have not strayed from your commandments.

111 Your decrees are my inheritance for ever; *
truly, they are the joy of my heart.

112 I have applied my heart to fulfill your statutes *
for ever and to the end.

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

SERMON

Jesus didn't make it easy on preachers. He'd tell the crowd a really neat parable, then he'd do his own excursion in private to His Disciples. What's the poor preacher to do with that? Try to be smarter than Jesus? Parables are meant to challenge the reader's prior understanding. The proper thing for me to do would be to tell you to think about the ways Jesus' explanation challenges, rather than affirms, your accepted understandings and assumptions, then sit down and leave you to it. Of course, you probably know I'm not going to do that. I'm much too fond of the sound of my own voice. Besides, even a blind hog finds an acorn from time to time. If I try to think this through with you, I may actually stumble over something important, so let's try.

This parable is sometimes called the Parable of the Four Soils, and when I looked at it that way, I saw

something I hadn't seen before. The good ground returns an abundant harvest, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. That's clear enough. But quite apart from the harvest, each of the other parcels of ground has its own, unique, contribution to make. The path, though unable to contribute to the harvest, is still a useful, even a necessary, part of the farm. It is over the path that people move to and fro, reaping and sowing. In the same way, the rocky ground has no soil on it because it serves as a drain and the soil has been washed away. Even the thorns have a job to do. People of the time planted thorns as fences. Next Easter, take a look at the Crown of Thorns and think about what an effective fence such a bush would make. So, because of the nature of each parcel, each has a contribution to make to the overall enterprise, even though only one is able to add to the harvest. It's not as if the

path could will itself to be something it isn't, or that the hard ground could suddenly, by an act of will, become productive. Each parcel is what it was predestined to be.

The next character we meet is the sower. This sower is generous to a fault with his seed. He throws it this way and that, onto the path, into the thorns, over the rocky ground – just everywhere. That kind of injudicious use of resources awakens the ghost of my German grandfather! I want to say, “Hey! Hey! Be careful with that seed! You have no idea how much it cost! We want an abundant harvest, not bankruptcy!”

And just like that, a mystery is revealed. The sower knows full well ahead of time where the path and the hard ground and the thorns are, yet off he goes, blessing everything with seed, even though he knows that there will be no return from those areas where a harvest is just not possible. Each of these different soils react, or

not, to the blessing of seed because of what they are, what they were designed to be, yet each of these areas performs a function necessary to the success of the entire enterprise a function determined by its nature.

Of course, parables aren't to be taken literally. We're not really speaking of seed, as Jesus explains later to His Disciples, but the word of the kingdom – the eschatological promise of the kingdom of God. This is the blessing which is showered over the unproductive ground as well as the productive ground. God's Grace is showered over all His Kingdom, rather than sowing only the good ground. Sounds like an odd agricultural policy to me, to spread your blessings where you know they will be ineffective, but that is God's policy. God knows that some of us just cannot understand the word of the kingdom, and it is taken from them; some of us are people of no great root, and we quickly turn from

the word at the first opposition; some of us are strangled by the cares of the world, the needs of elderly relatives or sick children, the stress of simple economics, and any of the myriad other challenges which come our way so that the word is choked before it can gain root. The limitations of all of us are known to our Father for he has elected the saints from before the foundation of the world. The Second Helvetic Confession from the Book of Confessions teaches us:

From eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the saints whom he wills to save in Christ. ¹

Presbyterians get a lot of grief from others over predestination. It is offensive to modern ears to hear that from eternity God has freely, and of his mere grace, without any respect to men, predestinated or elected the

¹ Book of Confessions 5.052

saints whom he wills to save in Christ, but really, that should be no surprise. God's free election was clear even from the birth of Jacob.

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.”

Everybody knows the elder has the birthright, but God, for God's reasons, chose the younger. We want to hear that hard work and good character is rewarded, that we can by our own wish or will become something we are not. Drain, path or hedgerow, God is master of His creation and uses it to accomplish His purposes. He is not bound by human notions.

Jesus tells us that the seed is the word of the kingdom. The seed is scattered widely, including onto vulnerable areas where it may be snatched away and into

lives of trouble where God's children may be too overwhelmed by care to receive it, as well as onto those which can make it grow. I don't hear Jesus condemning those who are too overwhelmed by life to receive the word for the state of their lives. I do hear Jesus saying that the harvest, a hundredfold, sixty-fold, thirty-fold will be produced by those whose lives are able to receive the word. God's word is scattered to all of His Children, wherever they are in life's journey, even though so many are so heavily laden by life and its burdens that they cannot hear the word effectively yet God knows that the harvest will be sufficient. No one knows the number or identity of those predestinated as the Saints of the church, for acknowledged righteousness is soon overwhelmed by pride. Embrace your role, whatever it is, following it with your eyes and heart focused on God's purposes.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

There is among the Jews the story of the Pillars of the Universe, thirty-six righteous men whose suffering supports the very universe. No one knows who they are, not even themselves. Their number remains constant in every age; should one die, another is born in that same instant, somewhere else. Even their mothers do not know who they are. In his beautiful poem, Mikael Horowitz poses:

Suppose for a moment that they could know themselves, and not immediately combust, or crumble to dust.

How then would it be?

Would it mean that Moshiach had finally arrived, redeeming the bleached coupon in each soul?²

“Yes”, a Christian might answer, “Moshiach has arrived.”

² Mikael Horowitz “Thirty Six Sentences on the Lamed Vovniks”

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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