

Proper 10 A 2017

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalm 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

There are a lot of sermons –
Terrible sermons and pretty good ones,
Sermons intended for the head
And sermons aimed at the heart –
There are a lot of sermons
That can grow from the ground of today's lessons:
Jesus' parable of the sower,
Paul's reflections on sin and grace,
And the beginning of the story of Jacob and Esau.

It's tempting to begin
By wondering how many have heard
The truly terrible,
deliciously appalling sermon
From Beyond the Fringe –
The forerunner of Monty Python –
A sermon in which the hapless vicar
Repeats, over and over,
Just this one moment from the story of Jacob and Esau,
In the immortal words of the King James Version:
My brother Esau
Is an hairy man,
But I am a smooth man.
My brother Esau is an hairy man,
But I am a smooth man.

Tempting,
But let's begin,
Instead,
With a different question,
A different doorway into the story of our first lesson,
Where Esau sells his birthright
For a bowl of lentils.
A question for the head.

This question:
What happens when a society
Is engulfed in cataclysmic change?
When technology overtakes industry?

When industry swallows up agriculture?
When hunter gatherers find the forest gone,
Cleared for fields and farms?
For some,
Just as the story of Abraham and Isaac
Dramatizes the end of child sacrifice,
So the story of Jacob and Esau –
Like, in a way, the story of Cain and Abel –
Captures a moment when hunting gives way to farming.
These stories from Genesis can be seen
As records of a people
Encountering change as overwhelming
And dislocating as the changes we face.
Their changes happened more slowly,
But their world turned upside down,
And inside out.
And the way our forerunners in the faith
Met those changes and challenges
Shaped our scripture,
Our worship,
Our vision of justice,
Our sense of community.
We are who we are,
And our faith is our faith,
Because of the ways these people
Met the challenges of their day.

When we read the story of Jacob and Esau
With the mind,
We see the brothers as rivals,
In a long series of rivals,
Rival brothers,
Rival mothers,
Rival tribes and nations,
Going all the way back to the beginning.
Conflict is embedded in our human story.
The human journey is a story of bitterness and beauty,
Pain and consolation,
Mystery and joy.
Our origin myths,
The legends of the forerunners in the faith,
All these stories
Show us who we are and how we connect,
With each other and with the holy one
Who journeys with us.

Looking at rivalry,
The struggle for power and favor,
Is one way to approach the story.

Another, perhaps,
Is to treat it as a parable,
To enter it, look around,
And see what we discover about ourselves.

What happens if we hold the story of Jacob and Esau lightly,
Explore it,
Wonder within it,
And, leaving behind all our assumptions,
See if Jacob and Esau
Can offer us a gift for now.

What happens if we let the story of the reckless,
Feckless hunter who throws his inheritance away,
Who falls into the hands of the grasping, scheming farmer,
What if we let this story
Connect with the parable of the rash,
Profligate sower
Who throws seed anywhere and everywhere?
What can we discover about ourselves and God?

Jesus loved to speak in parables.
His disciples were always asking him why,
Begging him to explain,
Assuming they knew what he meant.

But parables defy explanation.
They reveal their treasures slowly,
As we enjoy them.
They show us truth about ourselves,
If we enter into them.

People make a lot of assumptions about parables.
They – we – assume there is a real meaning,
And that, like a cryptogram,
It's all about cracking the code.
We assume parables are about "us" and "them."
We assume they are intended to teach us a lesson.

These assumptions can turn into traps.
They can leave us pointing fingers
And making judgments.

They can burden us with guilt,
Or fear, or resentment.
They can make us feel inadequate or smug.

The first half of today's gospel
Is a genuine parable,
A treasure trove of gifts.

The second half of today's gospel
can be a trap.
It comes from a community
Locked into assumptions and interpretations.
If you choose, you can let them go.
Forget the second half of today's gospel,
And embrace the first –
The true parable.

There are many ways
To find meaning in the mystery of this parable.
Here is one.

If we begin with an understanding
That a parable
Is both a story we can enter,
And a mystery that happens inside of us,
Then we can begin to see, sometimes,
That it's all about us.
All the ground on which the sower sows –
Rocky, barren, and fertile –
All of that soil is inside of us.

Moral judgment
and talk of "us" and "them,"
May have their place,
But I doubt it's here,
In the simple parable Jesus told.
This is a story for each of us.
The whole story can happen inside of us.

The sower is always going out to sow,
And has more seed than we can possibly imagine.
It will never run out.
It does not matter if some is eaten up
And some withers away.
Where the seed takes root in good soil,
It yields enough, and more than enough,

And to spare.
There is nothing to feel guilty about,
And nothing to fear.

Somewhere within each of us
There is good soil –
Rich, complex soil
Teeming with life –
Where the seed of the generous sower
Will take root,
And grow, and thrive, and yield a generous harvest.

There is so much grace raining down on us
At every moment,
Raining down on each of us,
And all of us,
That we will never run out.
There is enough for everyone.

And, it is also true,
There is within each of us
Some place,
Perhaps more than one place,
Where grace finds no welcome,
Where abundance lands on rocky soil,
Or cares snatch it away.

I know I have rocky ground
Where the seed will not take hold.
I know that some of you
Know how that feels.

I know there are times
When it seems there is nothing but rocky ground,
Or when the air is filled with hostile birds
Who snatch away the seed,
Or dry places where signs of life are choked
Almost to death.

I trust, though,
That there is so much grace
Flowing in and through the world,
That there will be enough for each of us,
Always, no matter what.

And what is true for us individually

Is surely true for us in community,
And true, as well,
For this beautiful broken world.

There are places where the seed takes hold
And yields abundantly.
There are places where it withers and dies.

The sower will keep sowing,
Everywhere,
And will keep on waiting to see what grows where.
The sower will never
Skip the path or the rocky ground.

Grace rains down on every piece of us,
The good soil and the rocks,
The paths and the weeds.
God sees it all,
And has more than enough seed
To sow it everywhere,
And enough time to see what happens.

So what if Jacob and Esau had understood this?

Or – to say that differently –
What happens if you tell the parable of the sower
to the Jacob and Esau
Who live inside of you?

Inside each of us
Lives the famished hunter,
And the grasping schemer.

Inside each of us
Lives an anxious rival
Who cannot believe
There is enough for all.
Inside each of us,
And shared among all of us,
Is the terrible anxiety of a world in flux,
Where nothing is certain.

And inside each of us,
Perhaps,
Is a bumbler
Who does not understand

The value of the birthright.

Our birthright
Is not a tribe,
Or nation,
Or church,
Or status or wealth
Or any other marker.

Our birthright
Is the seed,
Cast everywhere
By the sower who has enough for all.

Tell that to the Jacob and Esau
Struggling within you.
Tell that to the rocky soil
You cannot clear.

Tell that to those around you
Who want to keep
What can only be shared.

There is enough,
If we stop scheming and stealing from each other,
And stand together,
Letting the sower
Shower us abundantly with everything we need
To bring forth a fruitful harvest.