

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost,
Genesis 25: 19-34, Psalm 119:105-112, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
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As we read through the early stories of the Jewish origins in Genesis, we can't help but be struck by God's faithfulness to flawed human beings. Sarah and Abram are old and barren before their miracle son Isaac is born. Before that Sarah tried to fulfill God's promise of offspring with her handmaid Hagar. That led to complications and bad behavior. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, is also barren until God intercedes and grants her twins through a difficult pregnancy. Their boys are polar opposites. The oldest, Esau, will sell his precious birthright to satisfy his stomach, and Jacob isn't opposed to using trickery and deception to gain the upper hand. Even at birth he's trying to pull ahead of his older brother by grabbing his heel in the birth canal.

It should give us great comfort to know that the Almighty can and does use less than perfect people to get God's work accomplished. We are not great in God's sight because we have attained perfection but rather because we are made in God's image and likeness. Hopefully, we are still growing and striving to reach greater holiness every day. One of my personal spiritual goals is to try to overlook the faults I see in others and concentrate more on their strengths.

Birth place and birth rights have been very much on my mind this last week as my older and younger brother and I have been cleaning out our mother's house on the coast of Maine. It's been in our family since 1960, first as a summer home and later as my mother's year-round residence. If we lived in the time of these stories from Genesis, my older brother, Doug, would have solely inherited the property. He said that would have made everything easier. As it is, we are co-owners, and since our mother died 3 ½ years ago, we have been individually and together pondering and discussing what to do with the gorgeous shorefront property.

We have discussed four possible options going forward. Fortunately, we have agreed that whatever we decide, our first priority is to stay close as brothers and, God willing, not let our inheritance create a wedge to forge ill will among us.

Our attachments to that place are strong in each of us for varying reasons. I know that people are more important than places and that my truest home is with Juanita and my church family.

Interestingly, I read today's gospel lesson for the first time last Monday morning sitting on the front deck of our Maine home with a cup of coffee mesmerized by John's Bay just beyond our front yard and seawall. Lobster boats were hauling traps, and seagulls were gliding on the sea breezes. Waves were bringing in the tide and washing over the seaweed-covered rocks. A tractor could be heard off to my right about a quarter mile away cleaning up the public beach, readying it for the children and adults that would be arriving soon.

When I read, "Jesus went out and sat beside the sea," I understood the draw of just sitting and watching the sea teeming with life. I bet Jesus wished the crowd hadn't discovered his

whereabouts so soon, forcing him to get into a boat and address them. I didn't want to be disturbed either.

Like all of us, Jesus needed to just sit and observe natural beauty. One can't help but be mindful of the generosity and ingenuity of the Creator when we stop for a few moments and look at the magnificence around us and above us. Such diversity is incomprehensible. If all this that we didn't create works in near perfect harmony, how insurmountable can our problems be? Isn't God capable of providing answers and solutions for us?

Our problems exist primarily because we have caused them. We eat forbidden fruit to satisfy desires or gain advantages we were never intended to acquire. Take for example the clergyman who decided to demonstrate today's parable of the seed sown in different soils. He placed four worms in four different jars.

The first worm was placed in a container of Kentucky bourbon. The second in a jar filled with thick cigarette smoke. The third worm was placed into a jar of chocolate syrup. The last and fourth was placed in a jar of rich dark earth.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the preacher held up each jar and reported the results:

First worm in the bourbon – Dead.
Second worm in the smoke – Dead.
Third worm in the chocolate syrup – Dead.
And the fourth worm in the earth – Alive.

The minister was feeling pretty good and confident about this little demonstration when he asked, "So what can we learn from this?"

A little old lady near the rear of the church raised her hand and answered, "As long as you drink bourbon, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

She obviously missed the point. Jesus' parable of the four kinds of ground is intended to help us think about which kind of ground we are – hard-packed, rocky, weed-infested or good soil?

If we are hard-packed, we cannot receive anything new. We are unreceptive. Our opinions are hard and fast. New ideas and new information fall on deaf ears. There is nothing new under the sun. Our hard drive is full. Don't confuse me with the facts. I am not listening.

This isn't to say we don't need easy-to-follow paths sometimes. On our recent trip to Colorado and Utah we followed many discernable hard-packed paths and trails that got us from point A to point B. We climbed to the summit of 14,000-foot mountains, rode bikes in the desert and hiked in deep canyons. Without the paths laid down by others, we would have been hopelessly lost. Paths are necessary sometimes especially when we are following wiser people who went before us.

Rocky soil is pretty inhospitable for humans, and only very hardy species of plants and animals can survive there. People who see promise in rocky places usually wither quickly. We visited

Mesa Verde National Park, one home of the Anasazi cliff dwellers, now called the Ancestral Pueblo people. They built elaborate structures in cliff faces only to abandon them within three generations or about 100 years. The experts aren't altogether certain why except that they were unsustainable.

We all know people who start things with great enthusiasm only to quit because the going got rough or the payoff wasn't immediate enough. What stones or impediments have we put in our own lives? Do we have unrealistic attachments that prevent us from being good spouses, siblings, parents, friends and Christians? Park Lemmond's obituary in yesterday's papers was unique and worthy of commendation in that it disclosed some of his rough places. It said he gave up alcohol to be a better father and tobacco to be a better grandparent.

Weeds are often beautiful and absolutely essential except when they are competing with our gardens and our lawns. Their roots compete for valuable water and nutrients. We pluck them, spray them or let them diminish our yields. Like rocks they limit our growth potential. What are the weeds in your life which are competing for time and energy better spent on the love of God and neighbor?

The sower in the parable is practically wasteful in his spreading of the seed in hopes that the kingdom of God can find good soil among the hard-pack, rocks and weeds. At times, if not at all times, we have all four types of soil within us. God won't stop sowing the seed of life in hopes that more and more will find a receptive place in us. We are here because we have at least glimpsed the kingdom, and it enriches our lives beyond what we could ever make for ourselves and by ourselves. I hope this is a place and time when we are more open and more receptive to grace, hope, trust, love and faith.

Juanita and I were encouraged to attend a similar place our first Sunday away. It was a thriving Episcopal Church in Golden, Colorado. I was further uplifted by worshiping last Sunday in the local Methodist Church in the little village of New Harbor very close to our Maine house. The singing and preaching and hospitality were robust for a tiny community.

May we, therefore, do all in our power to become more fertile so the Word of life can take deeper root in us. Only then can we bear more seed for sowing. We sow seed with every sincere smile, kind word and helpful action in church and beyond these walls. Who knows when our seeds will fall in someone's fertile, receptive patch of ground and they, too, will be moved to join Jesus' big family? AMEN.

