

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23]

I'll begin with a short poem from Wendell Berry.

Sowing the seed,
my hand is one with the earth.

Wanting the seed to grow,
my mind is one with the light.

Hoeing the crop,
my hands are one with the rain.

Having cared for the plants,
my mind is one with the air.

Hungry and trusting,
my mind is one with the earth.

Eating the fruit,
my body is one with the earth.¹

The first few times I read this gospel, I assumed that the sower is God. Perhaps Jesus is saying something about God's investment in us -- that God's love is so abundant that God makes sure the seed is cast everywhere, just in case. Perhaps Jesus is saying that even in those rocky or thorny places there is the possibility of new life springing forth and a miraculous yield. Berry's poem coming out of a lifetime of care for the earth and building relationships of integrity as farmer, poet, and novelist suggests that we become the sowers—in our roles as parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors, fellow travelers on earth charged with reverence for life and, indeed, for all of creation.

Our gospel suggests we might create fertile soil in ourselves and in our community so that we can fill in the spaces in our sacred story and interpret the continuing and promised work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit – ideally in an informed, prayerful, inquiring but trustful way. If we take the time to enter these stories, if we let God's word rather than the cares of the world and the lure of wealth shape our own lives, God can work the hundredfold return which gives glory to God. As St. Andrew's thinks about its involvement in Haiti and what our contributions can accomplish, we find that our dollars here given in love have a hugely multiplied effect. That dollar a day commitment can be life-saving in a country where people live on less than two dollars a day and a huge percentage live in poverty.

Let us turn to another in our series of stories from Genesis. Rebekah left her family and journeyed to marry Abraham's son Isaac. Her people whom she was leaving for a new life blessed her: "May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain

possession of the gates of their foes.” Isaac loved her and was comforted in his sorrow after his mother’s death.

So, another 20 years have gone by. Isaac is now 60 and has been praying for 20 years for a child. His story with Rebekah’s is similar to his parents Abraham and Sara who had waited decades for the birth of their son in whom the promise of descendants would reside. They experienced the grief of barrenness until they were already elderly. And yet they kept remembering God’s promise, even as it was repeatedly tested. As Christians we are, if anything, people of promise; yet many of us are reluctant to wait and live into God’s time, rather than what we think is our own. Our culture and our need to be in control war against this. How good are we at waiting; how good are we at trusting in God?

What is it that you would wait and pray 20 years or more for? Would you continue trusting that God is faithful to God’s promises, as improbable as they are? How may you have experienced times of waiting and praying, such as we are in now with questions about when the corona virus will end? Has God used that time – as uncertain as it may have felt or continues to feel, to more fully enter into and transform your life beyond your imagining, to transform barrenness into promise, to use the darkness to allow seeds to germinate and to grow?

There’s a startling statement in this story: “Isaac loved Esau and because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.” The twins are now adults; say, another 20 years have passed since their births. I’m not a parent, myself, but aren’t parents supposed to be impartial? Is there any way they can be truly impartial, when one child seems closer to themselves than another? And a child can surely not control the regard a parent holds for them – there are so many factors out of their control – birth order, personality, appearance. Is it a fair and impartial system, this being a child? This being a parent? Does God love each of *us* the same or does God have favorites? What about the story of Cain, the first son whose gift was not highly regarded as was the that of his younger brother Abel. We know what happens with that early story – the pain, the anger, perhaps the feeling of being rejected is more than Cain can bear – so much so that he kills his brother.

Do we ourselves identify with Esau -- or Jacob, his younger brother by seconds, born grasping at his brother’s heel? A birthright – embodied in the system of primogeniture in which the oldest (male) child gets priority in inheritance and, hence, power and wealth – is not about fairness. Rather it is a system that has evolved to give order to a society and to ensure that wealth continues to be concentrated among the few rather than the many. Our country was populated, in part, by those who were not expected to receive a lion’s share of the estates of their ancestors.

We might think *we* wouldn’t give away something so valuable as a birthright – something passed on from one generation to the next -- for something so meager as a bowl of stew. But think again of how a birthright can be eroded – even if not given up outright. How many of us compromise our birthright for something we think we need sooner or that’s more urgent? And for those who come first for whatever reason (birth order, intelligence, attractiveness), we might assume that a birthright will be ours forever, won’t it? It’s something that some of us think we are entitled to and hence really can’t be taken away. What about those for whom a birthright will never be given freely? Is it not simply prudence to seek to find another way to get what we feel

our birth order has cheated us out of? What about those whose ancestors came first to this country? How many feel that all these newcomers do not deserve the benefits that our ancestors worked hard to enjoy.

Perhaps Esau, being the first son, thought that Jacob was only kidding. And he was very hungry. Perhaps as someone who was the oldest, a “skillful hunter, a man of the field” and his father’s favorite, it never occurred to him that he could ever be superseded or outsmarted by his quiet brother, the strange one who stayed at home.

And in our own country, blessed with riches, power, and freedom that many others can only dream about, over 44 percent did not vote in our last presidential election—did not claim the birthright of every US citizen. Moreover, our patterns of consumption and our sense of entitlement compromise the natural heritage and species God has created and entrusted us to use, care for, and pass on, leaving others in desperate poverty, lacking basic resources including clean air and water. The discrepancies between rich and poor are staggering and morally untenable.

As Christians, we are grafted into the Body of Christ and his royal priesthood through our baptisms. Is it fair that we have received Christ? Having received Christ, what are our obligations to ourselves and to the world? We learn how to be members of the body of Christ not only by reading scripture, but also by the communal Christian practices we take on including worship. How many of us have compromised our own and our children’s understanding of the faith in which we stand by allowing ourselves to be lured away from the sacraments, from liturgy, from observing the sabbath by the promise of success that the world offers and a host of other diversions – short-term gains or pleasures seized while the potential for a long-term love and fruitfulness of knowing and embodying the Word of God slips through our hands.

The Bible shows us that God overturns our expectations and the surety we thought we had – of who’s out and who’s in, of what’s impossible and what’s possible, of what’s proper order versus what feels like chaos to our small minds. God gives us something else, a new thing, something not necessarily of our own choosing. Rebekah in her long-awaited pregnancy experiences the intense struggle of the children in her womb and wonders if she should just give up. God overturns expectations. God chooses whom God wills to accomplish God’s purpose. Sometimes those selected to achieve God’s purpose, such as crafty Jacob, are not the ones we would imagine – they are not holy enough, their motives not pure. And yet God uses them as they are, just as God uses us just as we are, to accomplish the hundredfold harvest beyond our imagining and to enable us to give up, as the serenity prayer says, what we cannot change. And that is good news, the surprising news, of the Bible and the love of God that--unlike the world’s-- is limitless.

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ⁱ -Wendell Berry, “Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer,” **Collected Poems 1957-1982**