

Sunday, July 16, 2023 – Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

God's word is like the rain that waters the earth and brings forth vegetation. It is also like the sower who scatters seed indiscriminately. Our lives are like seeds sown in the earth. Even from what appears to be little, dormant, or dead, God promises a harvest. At the Lord's table we are fed with the bread of life, that we may bear fruit in the world.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word. By your Holy Spirit help us to receive it with joy, live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

First Reading: Genesis 25:19-34

Although Jacob was younger than his twin, Esau, he eventually takes the birthright away from his brother. Jacob is portrayed in the Bible as deceptive, gripping his brother when he came out of the womb and driving a hard bargain by buying the birthright for a bowl of lentils.

¹⁹These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac,
²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

²²The 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. ²³And 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."

²⁴When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward 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.

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) ³¹Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³²Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he

swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Psalm 119:105-112

¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp | to my feet
and a light up- | on my path.

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

¹⁰⁷I 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.**

¹⁰⁹My life is al- | ways in danger,
yet I do not for- | get your teaching.

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

¹¹¹Your decrees are my inheri- | tance forever;
truly, they are the joy | of my heart.

¹¹²**I have applied my heart to ful- | fill your statutes
forever and | to the end.**

Second Reading: Romans 8:1-11

There is no condemnation for those who live in Christ. God sent Christ to accomplish what the law was unable to do: condemn sin and free us from its death-dealing ways. The Spirit now empowers proper actions and values in our lives and gives us the promise of resurrected life.

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you,

though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In Matthew's gospel, both Jesus and his disciples "sow the seed" of God's word by proclaiming the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near." Now, in a memorable parable, Jesus explains why this good news produces different results in those who hear.

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When 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. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet 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. ²²As 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. ²³But 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."

Prayers of Intercession

Confident that God receives our joys and concerns, let us offer our prayers for the church, those in need, and all of creation, saying “Hear us, O God,” and responding, “your mercy is great.”

A brief silence.

Guide your church, O God, to sow seeds of forgiveness and righteousness on good soil. Direct your people to proclaim your love in this congregation and throughout the world. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Sustain your creation, O God, by sending favorable weather, causing trees and fields to grow, protecting waterways from pollution, and instilling in all people the need to be good stewards. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Maintain peace among all people, O God, and raise up lawyers to work for justice in the courts, advocates to speak for the downtrodden, and politicians to work on behalf of the common good. O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Heal those who are sick, O God (*especially*). Guide health care workers to care for those who suffer, scientists to conduct lifesaving research, and counselors to care for victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Answer the prayers of those gathered in worship, O God. Protect those who travel near and far, accompany visitors to this congregation, and nurture our faith. O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Inspire us by the faithful departed, O God, examples of your embodied love, whose confidence in the resurrection guides us in living lives worthy of the gospel. O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, in the name of the one who reconciled all creation to himself, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.

A reflection for this Seventh Sunday after Pentecost...

Life in Every Direction

We can identify death in every direction. We see war, hunger, addiction, poverty, a dying planet, and broken hearts. This is not a new story. The children of Israel surely saw death in every direction, wandering in the desert and at least occasionally wondering about their next meal. Paul looks at his own life and, at first, sees nothing beyond spiritual death. He reminds us that death is not just physical, but also spiritual. Then, in the parable of the sower, three-fourths of the seeds die and three-fourths of the sections of the field are inhospitable to flourishing life. Sometimes, life isn't even given a chance. We might look at the world and ourselves and only see the places that are absent and inhospitable to God's love.

Today's texts all go a step further, however, to articulate or reveal God bringing forth life where there is only death and God's absence in every direction. First, God renews the covenant with the children of Israel. After their own failures and disobedience, God restores a relationship with the children of Israel and gives them "the best of all the land in Egypt" (Gen. 45:20) and "provisions for the journey" (Gen. 45:21). Paul reflects on God growing new branches where old tree branches had fallen away. The parable of the sower elicits reflection, repentance, and, ultimately, new life from its readers and hearers in considering the sort of spiritual life they practice. Are we hospitable or inhospitable to God's word? This parable is a vivid reminder of all God has overcome—rocks, scorching sun, thorns, and snatching—to bring life to the world. God brings forth life in places where people see only death.

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