

The 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

Genesis 25:19-34 consists of two stories that lay the groundwork for the struggle between the two sons of Isaac – Jacob and Esau – and of the consequent struggle between Israel and Edom, the progenitor nation of the Arabian peoples. Isaac’s role in this story continues to be transitional; in fact, he must be seen in the patriarchal accounts as purely a transitional figure, nothing being particularly significant about him except for his father and his sons. This is particularly given witness by the fact that there are no purely Isaac-based stories in the book of Genesis. Isaac’s birth, childhood and even his marriage are contained with the Abrahamic narratives (chs. 21-24). And his remaining stories are contained within the Jacob narratives (chs. 25-26). He is nothing more than a transitional figure, to get us from Abraham to Jacob – but he is a very necessary transitional figure, for without him there would have been no Jacob or Esau!

The first story deals with the birth of both Jacob and Esau. Rebekah had difficulty conceiving, but finally did fifteen years after her marriage to Isaac. The fetuses struggled in her womb, and she prayed to God as to what this meant. God 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” (Gen. 25:23).

When the babies were born, the first who came out of the womb was red-haired and covered with hair. The second was born with his hand grasping the heel of the first. So the first born was named “Esau” (a word derived from the Hebrew *se’ar* or “hairy”) but was also called “Edom” (Hebrew for “red”) (vss. 25, 30). The second was named “Jacob” (*ya’aqob*, a verb form derived from the Hebrew noun for “heel”). The hand grasping the heel is very important to this story, because it indicates that from the very beginning “two peoples born of you shall be divided, the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger”.

The other important element in this birth story is the order of the births of the twins. Even though he was born just a few minutes before Jacob, Esau was considered as much the elder brother of Jacob as if he had been born fifteen years earlier! And as elder brother, he automatically was accorded both the birthright and made the legitimate heir of Abraham and Isaac. Although their conflict in the womb and at birth acts as a metaphor for the discord that will stand between Esau and Jacob, the true struggle will be over the birthright and the inheritance. For it will be these two realities that are automatically given to Esau by reason of his earlier birth that will determine the future of the children of Israel!

Thus, this story ends, “When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilled 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” (vss. 27-28).

The two children grew into two young men. And it was as men that their first major struggle took place. And that struggle was over the birthright.

“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” (vss. 29-34)!

Obviously, Jacob must have made one mean bowl of chili (because that was what the lentil stew was)! But that’s not the point of the story.

The point of the story is caught up in that story’s final sentence; “Thus, Esau despised his birthright” (Gen. 25:34). To truly understand this story, and why it would be so shocking and scandalous to any ancient Israelite hearing it, we must explore the question, “What was the birthright?”

The birthright was the foundation of Israelite society. The first-born son of every Hebrew family was the person upon whom the future existence of that family depended. Upon the death of that family’s patriarch, the first-born son assumed that patriarch’s position. As the new patriarch, the first-born son would make all the economic, political and religious decisions of that family. It was his responsibility to lead his extended family to practice the *shalom* expected of all Israelite families – a *shalom* both within the family and between this family and all other Jewish families of acting in justice toward all, equitably generating and distributing their wealth in order to eliminate poverty both within their extended family and in all other families, and to build a relational culture both with God and one another. Other family members could voice their opinions and might even sit in council together to advise the patriarch. But the patriarch would make the economic, political and religious decisions that would shape that clan. The future of every Israelite family depended upon the willingness of the eldest son to assume that birthright.¹ And that was what Esau was willing to give up – all for a bowl of chili!

The point of this story was to explain how the nation of Israel got built upon the youngest son, not the eldest. But there was a second – and equally important point to this story. This story was told and retold in ancient Israel in order to urge Israel to think about its own birthright. The story of Esau’s selling of his birthright existed to prompt Israel to reflect on the question, “What is the birthright bestowed upon us by God as a nation, and are we selling it for a bowl of chili?”

Like Esau’s, Israel’s birthright was an inheritance. Like Esau’s, it was inherited from its fathers and mothers in the faith. Like Esau’s, it was a birthright that concerned Israel’s unique collective identity as Jews. Like Esau’s, it was a birthright that was created to build a community of *shalom*, seeking to live out a common lifestyle of justice, equity and commitment toward each other. And like Esau, that birthright was not being extracted from Israel by force. Rather, by allowing themselves to become “like all the other nations of the earth”, Israel was substituting unilateral power for justice, greed and exploitation for the equitable distribution of wealth, domination and control for trust and love of God and each other. And thus, in their urgency to imitate the other nations, Israel was freely giving away their birthright of *shalom* without their

¹ Barr, O.J., “Birthright”, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 1 (NY: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 440-441; Cranfield, C.E.B., “Firstborn”, *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (NY: Macmillan, 1960), p. 83; *The Presence of the Past: Contract and Birthright*, pp. 137-150.

even realizing that this is what they were doing.² This story was told, therefore, to remind Israel that if they were not eternally vigilant, they would imitate Esau, and like him, despise their birthright!

And what about us Christians?

Psalm 119:105-112 is built around the letter *nun* or “n” of this acrostic poem. It begins with what is the most unforgettable line in the entire psalm: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v. 115). This captures the intent of the entire psalm – to honor the Law of Moses, and perceive it as the measuring rod (or rule) of Israel’s life as a nation and as its people.

These opening words capture the intent of the entirety of this segment (vss. 105-112) of the psalm. In this prayer to God, the psalmist states beautifully his relationship with God. Thus, 119:109 is poorly translated in the NRSV as “I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law”; it is better translated “My life is in your eternal hands, so I do not forget your law”.³ That this is the intent of that line is made clear in the lines that follow: “The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precept. Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes; eternal will be my reward” (vss. 110-112). Thus, the author is declaring that all that he is, does and believes is caught up in obedience to the Law; therefore, although others seek to entrap him by trying to lure him away from the Law’s precepts, he will not budge. For his life has meaning for him only by being thoroughly centered in the Law.

The author is suggesting a truly inspired way of approaching a document that lays out that society’s priorities and commitments. It can be used as a weapon by which to test people and find them wanting. It can be used to force their compliance with the will of their community, so that their individualization is thwarted. But it can also be a document of profound liberation, a rule of life that indicates the priorities and convictions of that society around which it forms its life together and thus offers to people and to the community’s institutions guidance and support. When one keeps in mind that the Mosaic Law (about which this psalm is written) is not essentially a bunch of rules and regulations that are designed to stultify life, but rather the articulation of what needs to be a nation’s priorities and standards by which they build their life together. In the case of the Mosaic Law, Israel’s priority is to be a people in shalom with both God and each other, and the standards by which such shalom is to be formed is to be practicing a politics of justice for all its people – including the aliens living in the nation, the practicing of an economics of stewardship that sees all wealth as a gift given by God and thus seeks to distribute that wealth equitably so that poverty is eliminated, and a religion of relationship. Thus, such a word to us as to how we build a society together is, indeed, “a lamp to our feet and a light to our path” that draws us “to perform your statutes forever – to the very end”!

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23 are both Jesus’ parable of the Sower (vss. 1-9) and his explanation of that parable (vss. 18-23).

² Adapted from *The Presence of the Past*, p. 139.

³ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III (101-150): The Anchor Bible* (NY: Doubleday, 1970), p. 167.

The Parable of the Sower is the first of seven parables told by Jesus in Matthew 13:1-52. Although he occasionally used parables before (e.g., in the Sermon on the Mount, 7:24-27), this is the first major collection of Jesus' parables that Matthew presents.

But what is a parable? The word, "parable", literally means "to throw alongside" – that is, a parable is a story that "is thrown alongside" a teaching in order to make that teaching both more understandable and more compelling. William Herzog, in his ground-breaking work, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, defined a parable as "not primarily a vehicle to communicate theology or ethics but a codification⁴ designed to stimulate social analysis and to expose the contradictions between the actual situation of the hearers and of God's intended justice. (Through a parable), even the illiterate could learn to "read" their culture and life dilemmas".⁵ In other words, the job of a parable was to stimulate analysis on the part of the parable's listeners, a greater understanding of both the world as God intended it to be and their world in which they actually lived, and to encourage consequent action on their part.

Thus, Jesus told this parable. "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 seed 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" (13:3-9).

Most of those gathered in the crowd by the Sea of Galilee to hear Jesus were farmers. But even those who were not knew what Jesus was talking about. Farming at that time was very intensive and painstaking work. The farmer didn't own the land he farmed but instead rented it from wealthy landholders. Because of the excessive rent he had to pay (normally 50% of his harvest) and the taxes required by Roman and Jewish political and religious systems (normally 35% of that harvest), the typical farmer had to work with only about 15% of his total income – and out of that 15%, he had to pay off all his operating expenses, pay community taxes, buy his seed and supplies for the next year's farming and still support his family. Every farmer, therefore, lived very close to poverty.

How, then, could a farmer make a substantive enough living to both support his family and to operate his farm? The only way to do this was to farm as much land as he possibly could. That

⁴ By the word "codification", what Herzog meant is a learning process by which illiterate people objectify a given condition (such as oppression by political powers) to recognize that this is not simply something that happens to one of them but a condition that is placed upon many. It is moving from an articulation of one's personal condition toward the recognition that what a single person is experiencing is a reality for a large number and even class of people; it is moving from a personal situation to a reality of human existence. Thus, a parable takes a familiar reality (the fate of scattered seed – vss. 1-9) and re-presents it in a unique and deliberate way for the purpose of stimulating conversation and reflection about it (as happened with the disciples in vv. 18-23) so that those who heard that parable can envision their lives in a different way or better understand the conditions that create the kind of society in which they live (and what they can do about it).

⁵ William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster Press, 1994), p. 28.

meant, in turn, that time was of the essence when he was planting and that he couldn't afford the luxury of burying each seed in tilled ground – and still farm the size spread he needed to farm in order to make a decent living. Instead, he would manually turn the soil and then would walk down his furrows, tossing seed in every direction from a pouch at his waist. Much of that seed would fall into his harrowed rows, get covered by the blowing dust and eventually ripen into a rich harvest. But, inevitably, some of it would fall onto hard-packed earth (particularly between the rows where he had walked), other seed onto rocky soil and, particularly at the edges of the field, remaining seed would fall into weed-choked land. Very little of that seed would survive but would be eaten by birds as it lay on the surface, have insufficient roots to survive on such thin soil or would be choked by the weeds. Everyone, therefore, knew exactly what Jesus was talking about when he told this parable.

But the objective of a parable was “a codification designed to stimulate social analysis and to expose the contradictions between the actual situation of the hearers and of God's intended justice”. So the real importance of this parable was not simply Jesus' telling of it, but the conversation about it that would follow it. The followers of Jesus gathered after Jesus had told this parable, and asked him what it meant. He engaged them in exploration and then stated the meaning behind this parable.

“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” (vss. 18-23).

The key to this parable was Jesus' opening words of explanation -- “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom”. Through both parable and teaching, as well as through his miracles, his acts of caring, and his calling of the systems to accountability, the people would “hear the word of the kingdom”. They would be reminded of what Israel was created by God to be all about – a shalom community of political justice, economic equity and a society of those who truly cared about each other and loved God. But that was not the world in which they now lived – for both the Roman and the Herodian political systems sought to control and accrue power, the economic system like their landowners lived out of greed even if that meant the people's exploitation, and both the Temple worship and the synagogue teaching was designed to dominate the people while guaranteeing wealth and power to their religious leaders. This was certainly not the world as God had intended it to be!

Although Jesus called this “the parable of the sower” (vs. 18a), it is really not about the sower who is the same person equitably sowing the seed. Nor is it about the seed, for the same seed is distributed to all. The parable is really about the four kinds of earth upon which the one sower sows the same identical seed. Jesus is the sower. And Jesus has offered to all who have listened to him (ruler and ruled alike, religious leader and novice alike, wealthy and poor alike) a new

way of life -- an alternative way of life – the kingdom of God (the shalom community). For some, that message will come as liberating good news. For others, it will not. But what happens to those who hear it as good news?

For some, this alternative way of life (this shalom community) will come as truth to them. But then their allegiances to the dominant culture will overwhelm that good news and it will be snatched away – like birds grasping the seed as soon as it falls to the ground. For others, that good news will take root, but when the opposition of the dominant systems – whether political, economic or religious – occurs, these people will be intimidated and immediately surrender their new-found good news. For still others, “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word and it yields nothing” – the priorities of the domination system simply choke off the possibility of new life.

But for a few – a precious few – they will hear the good news of the shalom community’s way of life, and they will embrace it. They will not allow themselves to be intimidated by nor overwhelmed by nor seduced by the dominant system. Instead, they will hold on tenaciously to the new work God is doing in them and their lifestyles. And they will be the ones who will birth this new society in the midst of this domination system. And they will experience results that will “yield, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty”!

“Let anyone with ears, listen!”

Romans 8:1-11 begins the section that follows Paul’s extremely-honest examination of his own sinfulness, and the perfidious nature in all of us that makes us do what we don’t want to do while not doing those good things we ought to do. That examination of our innate personal and corporate sinfulness brings Paul to the place of crying out, “Wretched man that I am – who will deliver me from this body of death?” He then answers his own question with the triumphant declaration, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (7:24-25)! Now, in chapter eight, Paul moves into a far more substantive development of what was otherwise just a hopeful and inspirational response.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For 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, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For 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. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For 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, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

“But 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. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If 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” (Rom. 8:1-11).

When one reads this passage for the first time, it inundates one, with strange concept after concept piling up onto one another until we feel both overwhelmed and lost. What on earth is Paul talking about, and what does that have with being set free from both our individual actions and our actions as humanity over which we seem to have little control? One reason that this passage is hard to understand is that it is so compact, with little development of an idea before another idea is introduced. It is dense paragraphs!

Even more important is the way that language is used in these paragraphs. In particular, Paul uses three terms that have a standard definition but uses them in such a way that it suggests that Paul has a far more nuanced and even distinct definition of these words that go beyond those standards. Those three words are “flesh”, “Spirit” and “law”.

The word, “flesh” (*sarx*) is used throughout the New Testament both by Paul and by other writers to mean our physical being or our connection or relationship to one another (e.g., Matt. 16:17; Mark 10:8; Luke 3:6; John 3:6; Rom. 1:3; James 5:3; I Peter 3:18; I John 2:16; Jude 8; Rev. 17:16). Thus, Paul speaks of Abraham as the forefather of the Jews “according to the flesh” (that is, they are physical descendants of Abraham) or of Jesus as the “son” of David (Rom. 1:3). This is the way the word “flesh” is normally used in scripture.

But Paul also had a use of *sarx* that was uniquely his own. That unique definition is magnificently displayed in today’s Epistle Lesson, for Paul distinguishes between those “who walk according to the flesh” (Rom. 8:4, 5) and those “who walk according to the Spirit”. He reminds us that those “in the flesh” can’t please God (8:8), that those committed to the “flesh” are both hostile to God and will only know death (8:6, 8). It is obvious from such usage that Paul doesn’t understand “flesh” to simply mean the body or our physical connection with others. He is using “flesh” in a mystical or spiritual way to mean human nature separated from and estranged from God. That is why the “sins of the flesh” that Paul lists are hatred, wrath, idolatry, strife, heresies and sexual immoralities (Gal. 5:19-21). And “fleshly humanity” is not just individuals but the entirety of society separated from God and consequently estranged from each other. It is in this sense that Paul is using the word “flesh” in our Epistle lesson for today.

Likewise, Paul is using the word “spirit” (*pneuma*) in a unique way. Paul picks up the Hebrew meaning of the word “spirit” (*ruach*), which means “wind”. In the Hebrew Bible, the word *ruach* is sometimes used to simply describe the wind, but in most instances, it has more of a sense of “God-breathed” about it as it describes the power of God being activated in a situation. Thus, for example, the Creation Story states, “In the beginning, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, and a wind (*ruach*) from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light” (Gen. 1:2-3). Or again, in Ezekiel’s famed story of the Dry Bones, the prophet wrote, “thus says the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath (*ruach*), and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. And the *ruach* came upon them and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (Ezek. 37:9-10). Thus, Paul is adopting this rich Hebrew belief of God-breathed power and stating that this power

is divine, the very power of God as “Spirit” who blows its “spirit” into forgiven human beings and their societies, so that they no longer are people of the “flesh” but people of the “Spirit”!

Finally, Paul uses the word “law” (*nomos*) in a unique way. When it is normally used throughout the New Testament, the word “law” is used either to refer to the body of national and international law of the Romans or of the Torah (the Mosaic Law) of the Jews. But Paul adds to *nomos* rich nuances all his own. To Paul, the Jewish “Law” meant far more than the Pentateuch and its accompanying traditions, and Roman law far more than Roman jurisprudence. The law, to Paul, was the religious, cultural, political and economic array of rules and regulations, of values, structures and people who ordered all life throughout worldwide Judaism (Eph. 1:17-22, 2:15-21; Col. 15-23). In other words, to Paul, the “law” was a “system”, inevitably infused by the corporate spirituality (what he called the “principalities and powers”) of that system. To read the book of Romans from this understanding is to make this book intensely relevant to the struggles of living as God’s people.

What does this examination of Paul’s unique use of the words “flesh”, “spirit” and “law” contribute to our unpacking of this amazingly dense passage (Rom. 8:1-11) that makes up our Epistle Lesson for today? Well, let’s look at it this way:

There is something in every human that wants to “beat the system”. We create and maintain political systems to order our lives (whether these are nationwide systems or simply the decision-making system of our own family), economic systems to generate and distribute the goods and services we need to sustain our life together, and religious systems to give direction and meaning and to articulate the values of our lives. But our own uncontrollable need to turn everything to our advantage corrupts these same systems. This is what Paul is telling us in Romans 7.

It has been put best by the old comic strip character Pogo the Possum. He said, “We have met the enemy – and he is us!” The enemy is not simply the systems. The enemy is not simply “them” – the maintainers and creators of the systems: the “political oppressors”, the “economic privileged”, and the “controllers of our religions”. The enemy is “us” – for within each person seeking to be financially secure is the longing to be privileged. Within each person feeling oppressed hides the urge to become the oppressor – despite all the rhetoric to the contrary. Within each person liberated by the saving work of Christ lies the “fundamentalistic” need to turn one’s experience into the primary measurement of everyone else’s relationship with God. We are the enemy. If we do not recognize that reality, we are either avoiding reality or are being dishonest about ourselves.

“We have met the enemy – and he is us!” It is our own deeply ingrained and perfidious nature that will keep on corrupting every system which we create and in which we participate. What hope is there then – for me, for my church, for my city – if even I am the enemy?

Paul answers his own question, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” with the response, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:24-25). Only Jesus can save the city! Only Jesus can release individuals, the systems we create, and all of the created order from the power of sin, death and the Law. How does Christ accomplish this miracle? Jesus answers that question in our Epistle Lesson for today.

“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For 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, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:2-4).

“Law”, “flesh”, “Spirit”. What Paul is declaring in this passage is that it is beyond our ability to redeem the systems we create because of our unconscious, uncontrollable need to exploit our systems and the people “serviced” by them. This is our “fleshly” compulsion. Only God can free us from this “body of death”. And this he does, not by giving us the ability to overcome our systems, but by providing for us a new system, the “system” of the “Spirit of life” in Christ Jesus.

The systems of God are able to liberate us from the control of the law (the systems and their spiritual principalities). God has done what the systems could not do, because we have thoroughly and pervasively corrupted and demonized all systems. God has already done for us what we cannot do for ourselves, for we cannot reform our systems because we have been “weakened by our sinful nature”. God has done this “by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin” (Rom. 8:3).

It is through Jesus Christ, Paul declares, that God has fulfilled the obligations of all the systems. All the demands that our systems make upon us, all the demands that the specter of death and corruptibility of our own personalities make upon us, have been met and satisfied in Christ. In his death, Christ has met all the conditions of the law, all the conditions of the systems. He faced the worst of death for us; he plumbed the depths of human depravity – both individual and collective depravity. In that condescending act Christ took upon himself all that personal, corporate and systemic evil could ever do. By taking such evil upon himself, Christ has liberated us – and all human institutions – from evil’s complex grasp.

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