

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b or Psalm 128; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52; Romans 8:26-39**

**Genesis 29:15-28** continues Jacob's story as he arrives in Haran and there is married. But what is significant about this story is that the manipulator is manipulated, the deceiver deceived. Yet through that manipulation, God works all things for God's own purpose.

As a result of his meeting with God at the ziggurat of his dreams while he was in Bethel, Jacob made a vow. He pledged, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God" (28:20-21). With that vow, Jacob continued on his trip into exile, eventually arriving in the land of Haran from which both his grandfather Abraham and his mother Rebekah came.

In a story that bears surprising parallels to the story of Abraham's servant meeting Rebekah in Genesis 24:11-27, Jacob meets his kinswoman Rachel at the well where he stopped upon his entrance into Haran. And as Rebekah was destined to become Isaac's wife, so Rachel would become Jacob's favored wife.

"Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father" (29:9-12).

Thus, upon arriving in this foreign land of Haran, Jacob found himself being welcomed and hosted by Laban, the very same man who had welcomed and hosted the servant of Abraham seeking a wife for Isaac a generation earlier. And just as Laban had proven himself greedy, manipulative and deceitful in his negotiations for Rebekah, so Laban proves himself equally deceitful in regards to the suit of Isaac's son for his daughter, Rachel.

The problem that Laban faced as the patriarch of his clan was in regards to the marriage of his two daughters. Jacob wanted to marry the daughter he had met at the well, but Rachel was the younger of Laban's daughters. Laban's firstborn daughter was Leah. And the custom in Haran was that the birthright of the first daughter was the right to being married before any other daughter could get married. Whereas the birthright of the oldest child, if one was a male, was to become the new patriarch upon the death of his father, if the firstborn were a female, her birthright was to be the first married. Yet there was a problem. "Leah's eyes were lovely, but Rachel was graceful and beautiful" (vs. 17).

That statement is actually a sarcastic statement, a "left-handed compliment" that is no compliment at all. The Hebrew word translated "lovely" in the NRSV (*rakkot*) actually means "delicate"<sup>1</sup> or "dainty". Thus, what the writer was saying was, "Leah had pretty eyes – and that

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<sup>1</sup> *Rakkot* can either be translated "weak" or "dainty" – i.e., one's condition could be "delicate" as in "weak" or "delicate" as in "dainty" or "pretty". In a number of translations, *rakkot* is translated as "weak", giving rise to the

is about all one can say of her – whereas Rachel was beautiful in every way.” This sarcasm is captured in another way. A biblical name of a person was meant to capture the essence of that person. The name “Rachel” meant “ewe” or “lovely sheep” whereas the name “Leah” means “wild cow”!

So Laban’s problem was that of how to get both his daughters married. If he was obligated under birthright law to marry Leah first, but she was not attractive to potential suitors who would instead want the gracious and beautiful Rachel, how would the father get both girls married? The innocent Jacob provided Laban’s opportunity!

After having been a guest in Laban’s household for a month, Jacob asked Laban for Rachel’s hand in marriage. Rather than explaining the Haranic law regarding a woman’s birthright, Laban instead moved to negotiate a bride-price. But Jacob had no means to pay a bride-price, because he had fled from Canaan empty-handed. Thus, Laban negotiated with Jacob for Jacob to serve Laban as a laborer (for all practical purposes, a slave) for seven years – his reward at the end of that time being Rachel’s hand in marriage. Jacob agreed, never realizing he had just been hoodwinked.

And hoodwinked he remained for seven years. Although he lived in Laban’s household for seven years and worked each day there, he never realized how he had been deceived. When his indentureship was completed, Jacob requested, “Give me my wife”. So the marriage ceremony was held, a veiled Leah received Jacob’s marriage vow and they were declared husband and wife. The tradition being followed was that the bride kept on her veil until the consummation of the marriage in sexual intercourse (making the marriage contract binding). The wedding feast lasted late into the night; then, Jacob took Leah to bed where, in the darkness of the wedding tent, they consummated the marriage. Then the scripture states quite clearly what next happened.

“When morning came, it was Leah” (vs. 25)! What a surprise that accomplished manipulator Jacob received when he awoke the first morning of his marriage! He had married Leah. Then, and only then, did he learn of the birthright law of Haran that applied to the daughter as well as to the son! So Jacob suddenly realized that he had been hoodwinked!

But Laban had a further proposition for Jacob. “Complete the week of this one (i.e., Leah), and we will give you the other also in return for serving for another seven years” (vs. 27). So Laban got fourteen years of labor out of Jacob that had not cost him any money, and he had solved his dilemma of getting both his daughters married. Jacob “completed the week of this one”, the week of bridal feasting. But it turned what should have been a joyous occasion into a week of humiliation for Jacob. The result was that “Leah was unloved” (vs. 31), the unlucky pawn in the deceit and manipulation of two men.

There is immense and even intentional irony in this story. Previous to this story, Jacob had seen himself as master of his fate, manipulator of the situation, the one who built significant power and wealth for himself through his deceit. But now he had become the deceived, the

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claim that Leah either had pus-filled or squinting eyes. But the context makes that translation highly suspect and even inappropriate.

manipulated, the one out-smarted by one even more cunning than himself. Further, that deceit was particularly ironic, for previously Jacob had so manipulated his situation that he – the younger brother – had replaced his older brother. But now, the older sister had replaced the younger, so that the tables had been turned on the one whose name meant “the supplanter”!

But there is more going on in this story than simply that Jacob had gotten a taste of his own medicine. In last Sunday’s lectionary, we discovered that Jacob’s meeting of God at the Bethel “ladder” had awakened him to a different reality. At Bethel, Jacob learned that his future did not lie in simply the actions he might take in order to build that future. His actions, instead, could as much lead to heartbreak and painful consequences for both himself and for his family as they could to the shaping of a destiny after which he might lust. Rather, what Jacob learned that night was that he was not the free agent that he supposed himself to be. Instead, he was a part of a much larger design intended by God over which he had little or no control, a future determined to shape the world. God’s intentions was for the creation of a people who would, by their actions and beliefs and responses to God, become a blessing to all humanity by articulating and working toward the creation of God’s shalom community upon the earth. And Jacob was an integral part of God’s plan to build that world.

Now, facing into the masterful deceit of Laban, and recognizing that he had been hoisted on his own petard, Jacob is repaid for his mistreatment of Esau. But also God’s agenda for the creation of that people who would become a blessing to all humanity has been greatly advanced by Laban’s action. For it would be through both Leah and Rachel, and through both of their servant girls, Zilpah and Bilhah that twelve sons and one daughter would be born to Jacob – children who would lead to the eventual founding of the twelve tribes of Israel, and therefore, the making of salvation history!

**Psalm 105:1-11, 45b** is the first of two psalms (Psalms 105 and 106) that celebrate and rehearse the sacred history of Israel. So rather than concentrate on God as creator, it is building the argument of trust in God on his trustworthy nature, as proven through the history of Israel. It begins,

“O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him; sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered” (105:1-5).

Thus begins a recital of the mighty acts of God as such acts both impact Israel and bring about its salvation. The psalmist begins with God’s choice of Abraham and the covenant made with Abraham which God carried out through the patriarch’s descendants in Canaan (vss. 5-15, the subject of the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday’s lectionary), Joseph and his rescue of both Egypt and Israel from certain starvation (vss. 16-25), Moses and Aaron and their confrontation with Pharaoh (vss. 26-36), the wilderness wanderings and God’s protection of them in such harsh conditions (vss. 37-42) and then, finally, their entrance into the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants (vss. 43-45).

The Psalm then closes with the cry, “Praise the Lord!” God has been so good to Israel in the way he has worked in their history. And so God will be good to any people whom God has chosen and called to covenant with Him!

**Psalm 128** was likely designed to be presented as a closing blessing to all those who gathered at the Temple for the three annual festivals (Passover, First Fruits, Booths). It is a reminder to the congregation that, as they leave, they should go on their way remembering that it is those who walk in the “way of the Lord” who will find themselves truly blessed in life. Although there is a brief mention in the psalm to a blessing upon the nation and the city of Jerusalem (“The Lord bless you from Zion; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem” vs. 5), the psalm is primarily centered upon the giving of a blessing to God’s people.

In essence, this psalm describes the state of someone who is truly centered in God both in life and in one’s vocation. The psalmist presents specific results that come from being centered in Yahweh. Those results are intriguing; they are as follows:

- ? Happiness and contentment that come from following God (vs. 1);
- ? One experiences purpose and meaning from one’s labors (vs. 2);
- ? All will go well with one’s life and one’s family (vs. 2);
- ? One’s wife will be fertile, contributing many children “like olive shoots around your table” (vs. 3);
- ? The nation and its cities will know prosperity if the people are focused upon God (vs. 5);
- ? Long life is the result of living focused upon God, so that “you see your children’s children” (vs. 6).

What is described, therefore, is human existence as a “shalom” experience when one’s life and work is centered upon God. The full definition of shalom is presented: happiness, contentment, meaningful work, purposeful living, fecundity, prosperity, and long life. Therefore, this psalm ends by summarizing its description of truly meaningful life with the wish and prayer, “Shalom be upon Israel.” The psalm has described a person and a nation who lives in shalom, and then wishes them a shalom-filled life. This is the blessing given to every Israelite gathered at the Temple to celebrate the three festivals of that year. And it is a blessing for all of those who are lovers of God and workers for God’s kingdom.

**Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52** continues parables told by Jesus. These parables are meant to be a part of a larger set of parables (13:1-9, 24-30) that demonstrate both what Israel was intended by God to be, what it had actually become, and what Jesus intended to do to make it meet God’s intentions for it. We previously examined the parable of the Sower (the four kinds of earth) two Sundays past (13:1-9), and last Sunday’s Gospel lectionary explored the parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:24-30). The five parables (plus one) that make up this Sunday’s Gospel lesson complete this analysis of the world as God intended and the world as it actually is. These parables as a whole are designed both to call upon Jesus’ hearers to discern the ways the Judean and Roman political, economic and religious systems have acted to thwart God’s intentions (“Let

anyone with ears listen!” 13:9), and to motivate his listeners to join with God in righting such injustice.

In this set of parables, it is quite clear by Matthew’s very construction of their telling that he intended particularly for the parables of the weeds among the wheat and the six parables for today to be considered as a single pericope. That intention is made clear in the fact that he first has Jesus tell the parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:24-30) and then has Jesus immediately tell the next two parables (vss. 31-33). He obviously intends the listener to compare and contrast these parables. Only after having intentionally telling these parables in such close proximity to each other does Jesus then go on to interpret the parable of the weeds among the wheat (vss. 34-43), and then concludes with the four final parables (vss. 44-50) that are clearly designed to support and to further develop the previous set. Further, each of five of these parables is begun with the statement, “The kingdom of heaven is like . . .”, and then presents its content. However, the parable of the weeds among the wheat begins, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, *but* . . .” and a transition then takes place. Therefore, it is clear that a comparison is being created.

If Matthew had intended each parable to stand alone, he would have followed the telling of the parable of the weeds among the wheat (vss. 24-30) with its interpretation (vss. 34-43), and then told the remaining six parables. But that is not what he does. Further, he would not have started the six parables with openings that clearly pitted the five latter parables over against the parable of the weeds among the wheat. It is clear that it is not Matthew’s intention to present us with seven parables that are simply descriptive of God’s kingdom. Rather his intention is to contrast five of the six parables with the weeds among the wheat. So that needs to be the way that we read those five (plus one).

What, then, are these five latter parables? The first of this set is the parable of the mustard seed.

“Jesus put before them another parable, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches’” (vss. 31-32).

The second parable is about yeast.

“He told them another parable, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened’” (vs. 33).

The third parable is about hidden treasure.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (vs. 44).

The fourth parable is about a fine pearl.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (vss. 45-46).

The fifth parable is about a dragnet.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (vss. 47-50).

And the sixth parable? Well, wait on for that one; it’s coming later in this commentary!

As we developed in last Sunday’s Gospel lectionary, the parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:24-30) presents the insidious nature of the domination system – Rome, the Jewish clergy aristocracy and the Herodian nobility. These institutions and their leaders are like weeds intentionally sown among a good crop of wheat. They look similar to the wheat as they mature, and the weeds can’t be removed from the wheat until harvest because it would uproot the wheat. So the domination system, sown in society by Satan, is insidious. It looks good! It is appealing! And it grabs hold of even the most relational culture, permeating and corrupting it. And once the domination system has gotten hold of a people or a person, it cannot easily be uprooted. It is like a cancer. And it brings death (harvesting) in its wake. Only on the collapse of a society or of God’s eradicating judgment upon it can God’s kingdom grow unhampered.

But, on the other hand, “the world as God intended”, “the Shalom Community” is also insidious (in a good way)! It is like a mustard seed that begins small but flourishes into a larger tree-like bush until the birds can come and take shelter in its branches! So the kingdom of God, the Shalom Community of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, elimination of poverty and relationship with God and each other begins “small” in society. It enters into even the domination system with just a handful of not very impressive people. But it is so appealing that, as the people organize, build relationships, develop leadership, confront the systems and build a culture on relational and justice values, it just grows and grows and grows and grows. And as it grows, God’s oppressed peoples from all over the world will come and shelter in the branches of the Shalom Community (the image of “birds” is consistently used throughout the Old Testament as a symbol for oppressed peoples – e.g., Judges 9:7-15; Ezek. 17:22-24; 31:1-18; Dan. 4:10-26). Thus, although God’s Empire will start small and unobtrusively, in fact even invisibly, it will eventually and inevitably become God’s force that will transform the entire world!

Jesus continues with his barrage of parables. The Shalom Community is like yeast that, folded into flour, permeates it and causes it both to grow and to reach its purpose in life. Folded into the domination system, the Shalom Community will permeate that system through its people, its empowering process and its purposes (its values), and the result will be a transformation of the domination system into a “new thing” – something very much like the kingdom of God.

But Jesus goes further. The Shalom Community is like treasure hidden in a field, like a fine pearl, like a dragnet. It is a rare gift and an investment that is wise for us to make. As the

kingdom is essential to the formation of society as God intends it to be (a “relational culture”), it becomes worth all our attention and investment. It should be the center of our lives, speech and action. It is a “treasure”, a “fine pearl”.

But it is also a “net” which captures in its life and work those who sincerely live by the ethics and actions of the Shalom Community and those who appear to embrace it but who really do not. Here, the kingdom is open to everyone, but if they are not captured by the kingdom vision and its Lord, they will be “sorted out” at judgment-time and will not rejoice in the kingdom’s coming. So they will be “cast out”.

But there is one more parable which we have not considered. It is the parable of treasures old and new (vss. 51-52). That parable takes a unique twist to which we need to pay attention.

Up to this point, Jesus has contrasted the domination system of Rome and the Jerusalem clergy aristocracy with the Shalom Community, the world as God intended it to be. He has described both systems as being incredibly insidious, seducing all of human society to their respective values and priorities. He sees both systems in a profound conflict with each other, with the fate of the world hanging upon the resolution of that conflict. He has suggested that the way that the Shalom Community will eventually win over the domination system is by infiltrating it and the lives of its followers, not by revolution or rebellion. But Jesus has not yet stated how his community will infiltrate and work for the transformation of the world as it is. He addresses this issue in this final parable.

Jesus begins this concluding parable with a question. “‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes’. And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old’” (vss. 51-52).

The question that Jesus asks is crucial to both the understanding of this parable and its role within this pericope. He asks his disciples, “Do you understand what I have been saying to you? Do you understand the nature of the domination system and how insidious it is? But do you also understand the nature of the Shalom Community and how insidious it is? And are you willing to be “insidious-izers” for Christ and Christ’s kingdom?” Happily, his disciples answer, “Yes”!

Jesus then responds, in essence, “If you are going to be “insidious-izers” for the Shalom Community, then you must become “scribes who have been trained for the kingdom of heaven”! This is a remarkable statement, for there were few religious leaders in Israel to receive criticism from Jesus as much as did the scribes. Why, then, if scribes left such a bad taste in Jesus’ mouth, would he now be calling his own disciples to be scribes?

It is intriguing to study Jesus’ attacks against the scribes (e.g., Matt. 23:13-32). He was not criticizing the scribes for their work as scribes. Their work was essentially that of being teachers and advocates for the Mosaic Law. What Jesus criticized was the scribes’ hypocrisy. They didn’t “practice what they preached”. Thus, Jesus excoriated them, “You tithe mint, dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (23:23).

Thus, Jesus is calling his disciples to become “scribes” of his kingdom of God. This is consistent with Matthew’s emphasis that Jesus was the new Moses bringing to a new Israel the new Law of God that would enable God’s new Israel (not those who are simply blood descendants of Abraham but are faithful to the faith of Abraham) to become what God had created them to be. Thus, Jesus is here saying that it will not be Israel’s current religious leaders – priests, Pharisees and scribes – who would be the new teachers; rather it would be the scribes whom he would call forth – his disciples and followers. Their job was to become the new teachers and advocates of God’s Shalom Community, proclaiming and teaching the faith and working for God’s justice and equity throughout the world.

So, “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven (i.e., Jesus’ faithful followers) is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old”. God’s new scribes are those who have been taught, discipled and instructed for “Christ and His Kingdom”. Some of what they have learned is “new”, as they have come to understand how God is working through God’s people in the world to strive for its transformation. Some of that which has been learned is “old”, in that such a community of justice, equity and loving relationships has been known since the times of Abraham and Moses. But these new Christian scribes, knowledgeable about both the “old” and the “new” are to act like a hospitable host who share with others the “treasures” they have learned from Jesus. Thus, by working in this way, Jesus’ followers will sow the seeds of God’s Shalom Community in all that they do and are. By doing so, they will “insidious-ize” the gospel in the world, and thus will help move the world toward that day when the world will become all that God created and intended it to be.

So what Jesus is saying in these six-plus-one parables is that both systems are insidious! He warns his disciples to beware and to actively resist the insidious nature of the domination system. But he promises his disciples that his Shalom Community, its values and its relationships, is also insidious! The way, then, that they are to “take over” the world is not by armed rebellion or political revolution; that will only catalyze the domination system against them so that Jesus’ followers have sunk to the system’s level and have demonstrated that they are no better than are the systems. God’s people are to “take over” the world by permeating the domination system at every turn with their shalom values, relationships and commitment to justice, and to organize to make that so in as many places as possible. Jesus’ followers are to outlove, outcare, outgive, and outjustice the systems! And in this way, organized to win small victories all over the world, disciples of Shalom will gradually erode the domination system and its appeal, and will thus “conquer” the world with justice, equitable distribution of wealth, elimination of poverty and building relationships with God and each other!

Although the lectionary ends its exploration of Matthew 13 at this place, the Gospel does not. Instead, this parable pericope continues to its denouement, in which the people respond negatively to Jesus’ teaching. They seek to both criticize and minimize him, saying, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother and his brothers and all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this” (or, in other words, “Who does he think he is”)? So the text tells us, “They took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house” (verses 54b-57).



Why did the people take offense at Jesus? One could understand why Israel's leaders would take offense, but why the people? Well, consider this. Even though Jesus was teaching in parables, the likelihood is that the people understood the implications of what he was teaching. They recognized how revolutionary Jesus was in seeking to return them and their society back to the true Mosaic covenant and its shalom community. But they had become comfortable living as exploited and oppressed people. They had learned how to adapt to the dominant culture, and even how to use it for their own limited good. And they didn't want any trouble. They didn't want the boat rocked. And so they lowered their critique of Jesus to *ad hominem* arguments to discredit Jesus and dismiss his call for liberation.

Thus, the ending of this pericope of Jesus' parables with this reactionary response of the people returns it to its opening words by Jesus, as he quotes Isaiah the prophet, "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their hearts and turn – and I would heal them" (Matt. 12:14-15, quoting Isaiah 6:9-10).

**Romans 8:26-39** conclude what is perhaps one of the most profound and comprehensive chapters Paul had ever written on his doctrine of salvation. And he ended it with magnificent and deeply moving poetry.

In Romans 8:1-11, Paul had declared that it is through Jesus Christ that God had fulfilled the obligations of all people and the systems they have constructed to order their life together. 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 humiliating 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.

In Romans 8:12-17, Paul seeks to explain the unique relationship between God and those who are the chosen of God by using the Roman metaphor of adoption. God has acted through Jesus Christ to adopt us into God's family. Because we have been chosen and adopted by God into God's family, we are full heirs to all the benefits of such legal association with God. We are heirs to the tradition of a politics of justice, an economics of equity and elimination of poverty, a religion of family relationship with God and all our brothers and sisters of that family. Further, we are "joint-heirs" with Jesus or, in other words, on equal footing with Jesus in our shared inheritance. Jesus may be the natural son and we adopted children, but we are no less children of our adopting father-God than is Jesus. So, no matter how we might feel about ourselves at any given time, the real issue before us is not whether we are chosen and accepted by God. We are! That's what the gospel is all about. The only issue we face is whether we can accept that we are accepted!

With this assertion, Paul then moves into what is probably the most profound statement in Romans 8. Salvation doesn't just have to do with us as individuals, Paul asserts. Nor does it have to do solely with the redemption of our political, economic and religious systems. It has to do with God's transformation of the entire cosmos (8:18-25). Although the universe is in danger of always "running down" (the second law of thermodynamics) and is consequently subject to decay and sin, its collapse is not inevitable. God is at work in the cosmos through Jesus Christ for its own salvation. It is to experience, in Christ, the same "freedom" and "glory" as do "the children of God".

What Paul has done in Romans 8 has been to argue a threefold salvation. Jesus has died in order to bring about the redemption of individuals (e.g., Rom. 8:12-17), the salvation of the corporate structures of society (e.g., 8:1-11) and then, finally, the redemption of the entire universe from entropy and decay (e.g., 8:18-25). Thus, Paul understood salvation as being, at one and the same time, individual, corporate and cosmic, of being personal, social and systemic. For to Paul, Christ had come to save the entire created order and all that is in it. That was the kind of God Paul embraced. And that is the kind of God he asks us to embrace, as well.

Now, in the Epistle lesson for this 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Romans 8:26-39 -- Paul concludes this remarkable chapter on the comprehensive nature of God's salvation of life.

First, he returns to his theme of adoption first presented in 8:12-17 to summarize his doctrine of election. He writes, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified" (8:26-30).

Sometimes, Paul reminds us, we don't *feel* very called or adopted by God! The world tumbles in upon us. Problems and conflicts and issues arise in our lives. The political, economic or values (religious) systems around us treat us harshly because we don't conform as Christians to their expectations of us. Sometimes those systems act unjustly and even oppressively toward us; sometimes we feel taken advantage of and even exploited. And sometimes we simply feel beaten down by the opposition because of our "long obedience in the same direction".

It is at such times that we can very much feel like giving in, of simply accepting defeat or to want to hide away and let life pass us by. But it is precisely at that time and sensing our depression that God's Spirit goes to work on our behalf. The Holy Spirit both buoys up our beaten-down spirit and even prays for us before the throne of grace. And through the Spirit's intercession, God strengthens us and renews our determination so that we might continue that "long obedience in the same direction". It is the very intervention of the Holy Spirit on our

behalf when life becomes darkest for us that is the true indicator that we are, indeed, called and adopted by God to be God's children.

Having asserted the work of the Spirit in the lives of these Roman Christians, Paul then reminds them of what it means to be called and chosen by God. He does so by reciting to them the process by which they are transformed from people of the "flesh" to people of the "Spirit", from people who once rejected God to people who are now embraced by and embrace God. That order that Paul declares here is that each of us are "foreknown" by God, then "predestined", then "called", then "justified" and then "glorified" (vss. 29-30).

What Paul is reminding the Roman Christians here is that God set God's heart on them long before they were even aware of God ("foreknew"), God chose them to be people who would be "conformed to the image of his Son" ("predestined"), God then called them to God's self, so wooing them to God's self that God proved irresistible to them ("called"), God redeemed them through Christ ("justified"), and has continued to work within them and through them to more closely become "Christ-ones" in and to the Roman world ("glorified"). And this God did within a "large family" (literally, "with many brothers [and sisters]"), so that this profound change in and to us is not done in isolation but to an entire community who is being wooed to God and is then being used by God to change the world around them.

Can you imagine what good news this was to people who were feeling overwhelmed, dominated and even crushed by Rome? What is intriguing about this statement is that Paul is not trying so much to make a theological statement (even though it is a most profound theological statement) as he is seeking to be pastoral. He is taking notice of the hard demands and the power of the opposition that faces the Christians in Rome as they seek to be faithful to Christ in the very heart of the Evil Empire! So he is seeking to buoy up these Roman Christians in the midst of their struggle – not by speaking spiritual superficialities to them, but by using theology to minister to these over-extended Christians! Thus, theology really shouldn't be done in the ivory towers of academia as much as it should be done out on the battlefields of life, where what might appear to be intellectually offensive shows itself to be powerfully therapeutic as Christians struggle to live out the gospel while under the attack of the principalities and powers of this world!

And that is exactly what Paul deals with in his closing statement of Romans 8. And that closing statement has provided inspiration and hope to millions of Christians over thousands of years, as they have sought to faithfully live out the gospel in the midst of systems of oppression, exploitation and domination.

"What then are we to say about (such persecution and oppression of us Christians)? If God is for us, who (of consequence could possibly be) against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:31-39).

This is a virtual crescendo of praise, meant to sweep up the reader in worship and adoration. But it is also an exceedingly profound statement that we need to examine carefully. For in a few sentences, it captures the very essence and the very power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

Paul begins this closing statement by reminding the Roman Christians, “You face overwhelming unilateral power when you face the resistance of individuals to the Gospel, of the political domination by Roman law and military might, of the economic power of the empire and the religious sway of Jewish, Greek and Roman priests. You face even greater power when you confront the spiritual and demonic darkness that lies behind these systems and provides them with their authority and potency. Who are we Christians who come up against such power? Why we are those who have been foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified by God! We have the greatest power of all – God – on our side. And if God is for us, who or what of consequence could possibly mount a winning campaign against us?

Romans 8 ends with a profound statement of power. It is declaring that we, as God’s resurrection people, are unstoppable – not because we are so personally powerful, but because we serve a God of power who works in and through us.

Paul develops his argument by posing a number of questions (vv. 33-35). “Who will bring criminal charges against God’s elect, and possibly have his accusation succeed?” “Who is the judge who is going to condemn us in a court of law?” “Who can separate us from the love of Christ by throwing us in jail?” “Can anything that the systems throw at us – hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword (all of these are punishments of the Roman legal system) – stop us?”

It is obvious when one looks at these questions that Paul has in mind the Roman legal system. He is saying that neither prosecutor nor judge nor jailor nor even executioner can intimidate those who belong to Christ. Each question is answered, in their order, “God decides what is good or evil, not the prosecutor. It is Jesus Christ who condemns – not the judge. It is God who protects those who belong to Christ, no matter what the jailor or the executioner or any lackey of the state might try to do to them.”

In other words, what Paul is stating here poetically is that, in the final analysis, nothing that a political, economic or religious system or that individuals might do to a Christian or to the church can possibly stop God’s actions to transform the world. There is no opposition big enough to beat God! As Walter Wink so profoundly puts it, “Every sanction that the state, religion, the economic system, the courts, police, the army, public opinion, mob action, or peer pressure can bring to bear to enforce our complicity in the great defection from God has been robbed of its power. They can kill us all day long, as Psalm 44:22 says, but they cannot separate us from Christ, and so they can no longer compel us to comply (vs. 36). That is our victory in

Christ (vs. 37). Regardless of what they do to us, they cannot turn the clock back to the hour before they were unmasked in the cross. Now their idolatry can no longer be hidden”<sup>2</sup>

But Paul is not through, yet. He continues, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, neither powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:37-39).

Paul creates four parallel constructs here. He states, first, that neither death nor life can separate us from God; what “the powers” do to our bodies will not stop the organizing effort we have started for Christ and his kingdom. Second, neither angels nor rulers can stop us, “angels” referring in this context to those spiritual forces in the universe that are demonic while “rulers” refers to those who head the Roman and Jewish political, economic and religious establishments. Third, neither “things present” nor “things to come” (or better translated “neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow”) – thus, not even time can stop us. Fourth, neither “powers nor height nor depth” can stop the Christian effort; “powers” is referring to the cosmic evil powers (Satan and his minions), while “height nor depth” is an astrological term. Many ancient peoples believed that their destiny was preordained by the stars. “Height” (*hupsoma*) was a technical astronomical term for a star at its zenith and consequently of greatest influence upon humanity, while “depth” (*hathos*) was a star on the horizon, waiting to rise and to gain control over a person.

Thus, what Paul is saying, although it appears to be most poetic, is in reality an extremely profound statement. He is saying, “Whether you live or whether they kill you, whether you are persecuted by the political, economic and religious powers of our society or by demonic powers, whether you are influenced most by your past, your present or the fear of the future, whether you face cosmic evil powers or the “stars” – in fact, even if you are faced with some other abusive force which doesn’t occur to Paul at this time (i.e., “nor anything else in all creation”) – nothing, absolutely nothing can separate you Roman Christians from the love of God that comes to you in Christ Jesus your Lord!”

Thus, in these magnificent words, Paul sums up his entire argument given in Romans 7-8. Sin is comprehensive. It is individual; it is social; it is economic; it is political; it is religious; it is cosmic. It is personal; it is corporate; it is universal. “But where sin abounds, grace does much more abound!” For God has provided for the salvation of individuals, of their systems and society, and even of the cosmos! And for you who are chosen, called, adopted, redeemed, and transformed by Christ, you cannot be beaten back by sin in any form. You may be accused before the law. You may be found guilty. You may be condemned to prison or even to execution. You may face hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword. But you can never be defeated. And you cannot be defeated because you are on God’s side, and God is going to win. God has the final power. So, even if they take away your life, they still can’t win – for you will wake up in the arms of Jesus! With such a way of looking at both their life

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Phila.: Fortress Press, 1984) p. 48.

and mission, there was now no way for the enemies of Christianity to defeat its effort to transform the Roman (or any other) empire into “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ”!

This is a scripture about power – the power of God as expressed through the Christian gospel. God’s resurrection people are unstoppable – not because we ourselves are so powerful, but because God is. We are called as God’s people, to work for the Shalom Community (the kingdom of God) in three ways. We are to share with others the good news of liberation through Christ so that each person and our whole society can come into that relationship with God through Christ that God so greatly yearns for us all. We are called as God’s people to organize for the empowering of the people as they and we together confront political systems and “principalities and powers” of oppression and greed. We are called to work for the equitable distribution of wealth so that “there will be no poor among you”. All of this, and no single portion of it alone, is Gospel work – the good news that brings about the Shalom Community.

When we are so centered on Christ and assertively working for the Shalom Community, then nothing can stop us (8:35), not even the systems of the world nor the Evil One (8:38). Rather, we are more than conquerors (8:36) who cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (8:39). Only as we commit ourselves to work for the Shalom Community, keeping before ourselves the vision of the world as God intended it to be, can we have a significant impact upon the world as it is. And it is only in being absorbed by such work do we discover why it is that God chose, called, adopted, redeemed, justified and glorified us as his own!

This is Paul’s “Great Commission” – that life-centering objective to which we’ve been called. This is the great privilege we have been given as we seek to follow our resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, into his world to seek its transformation into his kingdom by using the relational power he has placed at our disposal!

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