

Jacob and Esau

I had to write a paper this week on the Scripture passage Brian read this morning. We see quite a contrast between the twin brothers, Esau and Jacob. When you dig down and look at how things literally translate from the Hebrew, Esau is cast in a really negative light. The connotations regarding how he's described at birth, and later, at wanting to eat the soup, make him out to be more like a wild animal than a person. Meanwhile, his brother, Jacob, as deceitful as he is to our modern understanding, is upheld as a figure representing culture and a civilized way of life.

As followers of Jesus, it's important for us to spend time reading the Bible, in its entirety. That includes the Old Testament. Typically in Methodism, we don't usually hear sermons based on Old Testament texts. Depending on what the revised common lectionary text cycle has listed for the week, you may hear some sermons from the Old Testament from me – especially when we get into Kings and Chronicles sometime next year. This morning though, while brutish Esau, and scheming Jacob are still fresh in your mind, I'd like to turn to our Gospel passage found in Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. If you have a Bible, or Bible app you can read along with me. I'll be reading from the New International Version this morning. **Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.**

Parable of The Sower

I suppose you might say that Jacob eventually became good soil, and coarse, "hangry" Esau eventually does, too. For those of us who've been in church for years, we've probably heard this parable of Jesus a hundred times. The way it's introduced is very telling. "Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore," (Matt. 13:1-2). The crowd is so large that Jesus had to get into a boat and teach from there. When Jesus talked, He drew a crowd!

Jesus proceeds to teach the people using parables. Parables were a common teaching tool in those days. When we were in elementary school, we had to read Aesop's Fables. Remember those? They were stories used to teach a lesson about how to treat other people. Parables are similar, they're used to teach us how we ought to live. So Jesus starts talking about a farmer, going out to sow seed. I want to take some time to talk about the farmer this morning. The farmer is not a modern farmer! The other night during our Adult Study we got on the topic of farming. Today it's a multi-million dollar operation, with satellite guided equipment used for planting. Nothing goes to waste!

The farmer in the parable Jesus tells, though, scatters his seed seemingly at random. Some of his seed falls on the path, and before it even has a chance to work

its way into the hardened ground, the birds come along and make a three-course meal of it! Some falls on rocky ground, and gives a quick result, but the soil is thin. When the sun rises, the crop withers away. Jesus says, “they had no root,” (verse 6). Some seed falls onto ground covered with thorns. As soon as the crop starts to sprout, the thorns choke it to death. Thorns have the tendency to demand their own territory, don’t they? But some seed – some seed – falls on good, fertile soil and grows a bountiful crop.

Not How We’d Do It

I wonder what people in the crowd thought that day, when Jesus, a carpenter by trade, was telling them the story of a farmer sowing seed, while sitting out in a boat, far away from the nearest farm. Jesus doesn’t give them high-browed, intellectual lectures on theology and what to believe. He doesn’t take a piece of Scripture and pick it to death, the way the scribes over in Jerusalem like to do. He takes a simple image, like those that occur in everyday life, and paints pictures around them of what the kingdom of heaven is like. It’s like a mustard seed, or yeast in the bread dough. It’s like a hidden treasure, like a pearl of great price or a net thrown into the sea, He tells us in other places of Scripture. Jesus paints mental pictures that are easy for the mind’s eye to see, and for our hearts to embrace.

I wonder if the parable of the sower was a familiar one to the people who first heard it. They would have known some about agriculture and farming in those days. I suspect the farmers even in that day were more careful than the sower Jesus is talking about. They may not have had GPS guided tractors and combines, but they knew how to put seed into the ground. You don’t do it by just tossing it up in the air and hoping that some of it lands on good soil.

But that’s exactly what Jesus’ sower did. Can you imagine the reactions of the first hearers, familiar with farming? They would have been smiling, maybe even laughing, “That’s not how I’d do it,” they might say. That’s the point, though, with God, isn’t it? The way He does things are very different than the way in which we do them. Depending on the day, you and I can be very different types of soil.

Emmaus and Alpha Center

Several years ago I was on an Emmaus team. Let me preface this by saying that Emmaus can be a great experience, especially I think for people who are seekers. Folks who aren’t sure about God or Jesus. They maybe don’t have “roots.” They don’t have a deep, on-going, daily connection to Jesus Christ. An Emmaus Walk can be just the thing that causes those roots to sink down, and make them good, fertile soil. It can set them on fire for Jesus Christ, and that’s a good thing!

For me personally, Emmaus was more of a retreat. I didn’t learn anything new, or gain some greater understanding than I already had beforehand about the greatness of God’s love, though the Candlelight service when people show up and sing to you is

breathtakingly beautiful! Being on a team, though, you see through the cracks into people's lives. There were a couple pilgrims. One was a recovering drug addict, the other had been incarcerated for drug dealing. The man battling addiction didn't even make it through the weekend. He left on Friday night. The other seemed to get the message, stayed in contact with me for about six months, but then fell off the radar.

The other night some of us were down at the Alpha Center. We saw all kinds of soil – dirt – there. Some of it was fertile. Some was rocky. Others were infested with thorns of worry, and at least one argument over wearing shoes, from what I was told afterwards. Some were there solely for the free food, like the birds in the parable Jesus told. We go down there three times a year. Why? Is it just to give ourselves the experience of seeing that there are people living in Sidney who are worse off than us? We could just drive down to Jefferson Street if we wanted to do that.

No, we do it because we've got bags full of seed, and God calls us to go and sow. Some of the seed will fall on hard ground, and our efforts will come to nothing. Some of it will land among the weeds, and some will land on rocks. But some of what we do will find its way into the soft, accepting soil of hearts that are desperately begging to know more about God, and the good news of salvation which only Christ alone can give. That's why we do it.

Seeds in the Dirt

There's good soil everywhere you go, whether that's here at the corner of Patterson-Halpin and Mason roads, down at the Alpha Center, on a Walk to Emmaus, and even on Jefferson Street. There's just enough good dirt to keep us going, and keep us growing – to make our efforts worth it, even if some of the seed yields nothing. Jesus explains the parable to His disciples. To paraphrase, He tells them the different types of dirt are different types of people. We aren't responsible for the growth – the results of scattering the seeds. Our job – the only job we've got, and that's you and me both – is to scatter the seed.

God, who we model ourselves after, sows the Gospel generously towards us. And towards all people. The big take-away for us this morning is for the Church – every part of it – to go and do likewise. To sow the love of Christ generously, to all people. God's generosity of grace scattered towards us through Jesus' own blood, should be scattered out on all others around us. Let the one who has ears to hear, listen; and let all the hearers pick up their seed pouches and begin sowing! God, in His mercy and grace, will see to it that some of it lands on good soil!

Prayer: Lord, send us out – send each of us out – to cast Your seed of hope, encouragement, and redemption in Jesus' name. Then, give us the patience and faith to leave the results of the growth to You. Amen.