

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JULY 10, 2011

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

FAMILY FEUD

There used to be a TV game show called “Family Feud.” I don’t remember ever watching it, so I decided to ask my friend Google to help me. I keyed in the question, “What happened on the TV show “Family Feud?” Here is Google’s answer, “Two families compete against each other in a contest to name the most popular responses to a survey question posed to 100 people.”

The reason I was thinking about that particular show was because my reading of this morning’s passage from Genesis brought it to mind this week. It is a troublesome passage for sure, and this week when I read it the Old Testament words, “Family Feud” came to my mind. I was thinking of feuds within families. You hear about them all the time, families where certain people have not spoken to each other for years. Sometimes there are deathbed pleads for forgiveness, and sadly many times there is no reapproachment and anger and resentment are taken to the grave.

The Old Testament story of Isaac’s sons Jacob and Esau is presented to us on the same day as the New Testament lesson from the gospel of Matthew, the parable of the wheat and the tares— the wheat and the weeds. What a wonderful message is contained in that story, that parable! Jesus explained that the farmer went out to sow some seed. Picture him as he has been portrayed by various artists. The farmer dressed in his garb of the day has a large pouch hanging from his neck. He holds the pouch out in front of him, and as he walks across his land he reaches into the pouch and takes out a handful of the grain. He swings his arm in a large half circle around him broadcasting the seed as he does. The farmer’s field is made up of various kinds of soil. Some is rocky, some is full of thorny weeds, some is the beaten down path

itself, some is very good soil. We have the sense that the farmer knows, even while he sows the seed that not all of it is going to grow well and produce a crop for him. It is like people I know who plant very large gardens each year, not just for themselves, oh no! They plant enough delicious vegetables to feed the hungry deer, racoons and rabbits– and they hope against hope that out of all that abundance there will be some left for them.

In the parable the seed that falls on the packed-down dirt of the path is quickly eaten up by the birds. This is like those who hear the word of God, but do not understand it and the enemy comes and snatches it right away.

The next seed falls on rocky ground where there is very little soil in which the seed's roots can take hold. It will soon die because the sun will come and scorch the seedling. That rocky soil is like those who hear the message of God, and they are filled with joy. But since their faith has no root, if disaster or persecution comes they will fall away from God.

Some seed will fall in among the thorns, and even though it might take root and begin to grow, it will soon be choked out by the thorns. The thorny soil is like those who hear the word of God, but it doesn't go anywhere, it doesn't become a real part of their lives. Soon all of life's worries and the desire to get ahead financially destroy their walk with God.

The good news is that some of the seed will fall on good soil, and it will produce a abundant crop of grain, more than a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown. The seed that falls on good soil is like those who hear the message of God and accept it and understand it. They will go on to produce results for the kingdom of God, an abundant crop for the Lord.

What is the parable of the sower saying to us? First, I would speak to those who have heard the word of God, maybe you have even been in church on Sunday mornings for a long time. But maybe you are one for whom the seed has fallen on rocky ground or deaf ears. Perhaps there is not much depth to your faith, and a harsh word can destroy what is there. Or, you let worries over the things of the world push the truth of God aside

Next, I would speak to those who are the good soil folks. You have spread the seed. You have lived the life of a Christian, and you have remained faithful in all things and in all situations. You might ask, how did I spread the seed. My answer is that when you follow Jesus Christ in all you do, you are spreading the seed of his love and grace. You do it when you give to God through the church, and when you teach Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, when you take care of God's house, and when you work to ease another person's hunger or pain.

Parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles have a huge field in which to sow some precious seed. All of us have a huge field, because all of us can sow seed in our daily lives. I don't know if you are like me, but I can watch a TV commercial many, many times, and even if I like it I won't necessarily know what product it was promoting if I am asked. There is a commercial I have seen a lot in several variations. It shows a chain of people going about their daily business, and as they do they perform small acts of kindness, helpfulness for complete strangers. Each time one of these acts is performed, someone is an observer. Then, the observer becomes the doer also performing a kindly though different act. At the end of the commercial, the advertising company makes the statement that that kind of behavior is how they do business-sowing seeds of kindness.

I think that the patriarch Isaac and his wife Rebekah could have learned

something from Jesus' parable because Isaac really put some bad stuff into the heads of his sons. Of course, Isaac and Rebekah lived hundreds of years before Jesus. The fact is that they were parents who had favorites. Rebekah and Isaac had twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Esau was red and hairy, a skilled hunter and outdoorsman; and Isaac loved his son Esau. Jacob was a quiet man, a homebody, and his mother Rebekah loved her son Jacob. Esau was the oldest and Jacob the younger.

Jacob was a trickster, and Esau— well Esau was a weak reed in some respects, because as the Bible says, one day Esau sold his birthright as the firstborn all for a pot lamb stew. He loved his red meat! He actually begged his brother for the food saying that he would surely die without having Jacob' stew. But Jacob was shrewd and made Esau swear an oath, and the birthright which would have given him a double inheritance was bartered away for a plate of foo. The Bible gives us these bitter words, "So, Esau despised his birthright." Jacob's people and Esau's people would be enemies forever.

Jacob's trickery did not stop with the getting of the birthright. One day Jacob, with the help of mother Rebekah who was certainly a devious woman, hatched a plot to receive his father's blessing, the blessing meant for the oldest son, for Esau. Isaac was very old and his eyesight was poor. Rebekah had Jacob put on animal skins so that he would be hairy to the touch just like Esau, and he would also smell of hunting like Esau did. They prepared some food, some more of that good red meat stew, to given to Isaac saying it was Esau bringing the food. And, in a way it was almost like history repeating itself, because Isaac loved the food and the way the son who brought it seemed to be his beloved son Esau. So, Isaac gave his blessing to Jacob before he died. And Esau, when he found out what had happened was beside himself: Jacob his brother had tricked him out of his birthright and his blessing. So, Esau hated Jacob in his heart and he determined to kill his brother after their father died. The

family feud began and the story went on.

Imagine the seeds that Isaac and Rebekah might have planted. Think of how they could have raised those boys. But, alas, they were not loved the same by both parents, and they were not treated the same. Rebekah did not teach her favorite son to live a good and moral life, instead she taught him to lie and steal. Isaac did not treat both his sons as a father should. What would have happened if Isaac had taken more of an interest in Jacob? What if the boys' parents had prepared them to be good soil able to receive their teachings so that they would grow to be fine men?

What happened is even worse than that. Just as Rebekah and Isaac did not sow the seeds of righteous living on the good soil of their sons, so Jacob grew up to make the same kinds of mistakes his parents made. Jacob, of course, is the famous patriarch who had twelve sons, and those twelve sons grew up to be the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel from whom all Jews will trace their family line. Our Vacation Bible School curriculum this year speaks of the twelve tribes, and you will likely begin to see the names of those tribes around the church in the next few weeks.

One of Jacob's sons was Joseph, and the silly Jacob did the same thing his dad did. He loved Joseph more than the other sons, and he let it show in so many ways. One way was really something when you think about it. He gave Joseph a coat of many colors, a very beautiful coat with long sleeves. None of the other eleven sons ever got a coat like that from their father, so they were jealous. And of course, since Joseph was younger and probably a spoiled little kid anyway, he tattled on his brothers, and he had dreams which seemed to say that he was better than his brothers. Joseph turned out to be a great man with great responsibility, a good man who was able to save his whole family from famine. But back then, as a boy he was a bit of a bragger, and his brothers began to despise him, so much so that they wanted to kill him and then lie about it to their father Jacob.

If only Jacob had not carried on the family feud from one generation to another. Yet, Jacob is only one of countless people throughout the ages who carry on the family feuds. How does God look at this kind of behavior?

I believe that the parable of the sower has some good lessons which we can relate to the every day problems of life. Lesson number one is that the farmer in Jesus and Jesus is the generous sower. He throws out the seed generously without hesitation, letting it fall everywhere. Why would he do that? Why would Jesus sow the seed even on the path, or on rocky soil, or in amongst the thorns? Why would he do that when there was so little chance that the seed could flourish?

Have you ever climbed the rocky side of a steep hill or mountain where almost nothing can grow? Maybe you've seen pictures of what it looks like several thousand feet up in the air. I remember climbing around in places like that in my younger days, and I remember being amazed at sometimes seeing a tree sticking out from the rock, hanging on to life. My friends, that is why Jesus is so liberal in the sowing of his seed, even in the most unlikely places. It is because he knows that every once in awhile there is going to be someone who catches on to what he has said, and that person will hold on against all odds. Perhaps you are like that tree that hangs onto the rocks, growing in spite of everything.

Let's face it, there are times when all of us feel like we are just a beaten down path or a patch full of thorns. Jesus has a hard time getting through to us. But he does not give up on us. And just to be sure, he throws a few more handfuls of seed toward us because there is always a chance that this time that seed might germinate and grow. If you are that beaten down path, or patch of thorns, know this: Jesus is a good farmer. He is always ready to give you one more handful of seed. Do not be discouraged.

If we are the good soil and the seed has been sown in us, we have the work of the kingdom to do. We too can throw out the seed, never giving up. We teach our kids right from wrong and hope and pray the seed will sprout up and grow. We forgive those who have caused us grief, and we try to heal family feuds. We help the poor and suffering even though there will always be the poor and suffering. We live our lives as Christ has shown us to live hoping to be an example for others. Even though we make many mistakes, we keep throwing out the seed. We do not give up and stop sowing the seed because Jesus never stops either. Sometimes, we have no idea what kind of soil our seed will fall on, and that is okay. We pray that it is good soil that will produce a hundred fold. It may produce thirty, and it may produce nothing. Our job is to keep on throwing out the seed, and not give up. Amen.