

July 13, 2014  
Genesis 25: 19-34  
Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23  
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Two weeks ago I preached on the story of the almost sacrifice of son Isaac by his father Abraham. Today we enter into the story after Isaac has married Rebekah and the descendants of Abraham continues to unfold with the birth of twins, Esau and Jacob.

When Rebekah experiences an increasing amount of severe pain from her pregnancy we are told that she went to inquire of “her Lord” as to why she was in so much pain. The answer she received was that she had “two nations in her womb and these two people would be divided, one stronger than the other and that the elder would serve the younger.” Sure enough, when she gave birth, there were twins in her womb. As the brothers grow together, their differences become even more evident than their physical appearance at birth! Their personalities are strikingly different, they choose different occupations and to exacerbate the situation, their parents each favor one over the other. Rebekah favors Jacob while Isaac, Esau.

Let’s just say that the family dynamics are questionable at best and these family dynamics anticipate future events that will be played out on the world stage as well. Some Jewish scholars believe the dynamics between Esau and Jacob – the “nations” which the Lord said were in Rebekah’s womb, represented Rome and the Jewish people. Others have said it is symbolic of Judaism and Christianity; seems to me it could even be the violent “rivalry” between Palestine and Israel.

UCC executive Karen Georgia Thompson reflects on this passage saying: *“This on-going struggle between Esau and Jacob makes me think of the many relationships we encounter regularly. Besides familial relationships, there are relationships with colleagues and friends, and relationships in our places of worship and spiritual contexts. There are also our general encounters with people each day. In all of these encounters there is potential for healthy relationships or divisive conflict and we each have a role in determining what that relationship will be. There is a place for healthy competition, yet there are some places where competition can be unhealthy and relationships that are steeped in rivalry prove to be detrimental to community life.”* (“A House Divided” by Karen Georgia Thompson)

The idea that “we each have a role in determining what that relationship will be” is crucial. In today’s reading from Genesis there is almost an attitude of “destiny”, as if the rivalry between these two siblings just can’t be helped.

In the reading from the Gospel of Matthew we have the well-known parable of the sower. One scholar pointed out that perhaps it should be called “the Hundredfold Harvest” because it is a parable that ends with a miracle. Bushels of abundance, is where this parable leads though Jesus begins it with a good dose of realism as he describes the trials of first-century farming. Unlike a modern American farmer who carefully prepares the soil with just the right pH balance and then injects the seed into the ground, farmers in Jesus’ time cast the seed and then plow the land.

With this scattershot approach, it is no surprise that some seed falls on hard soil, other seed on ground too rocky for good roots, and still other seed among thorns and weeds. Those are the facts of life, or the facts of first-century farming. (Feasting on the Word, Yr. A, Volume 3) But we must not lose sight of the abundant miracle at the end of the parable – while some of the seeds don’t make it, some did and brought forth hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Sevenfold meant a good year for a farmer in Jesus’ day! --- So a hundredfold, sixty and thirty is truly a cause for celebration!

While this is traditionally thought of as a parable about faith, I would like to invite us to consider it as a metaphor for relationships as I will now blend the two readings together: Consider the Sower as being God who generously sows seeds of relationships, of **potential connection** everywhere – some might say a bit haphazardly even. How it grows – how the seed “takes” depends a lot on the ground where it lands in us.

Esau and Jacob made choices in their relationship with one another and were unfortunately encouraged by their parents to be in severe and unhealthy competition with one another. Their thorny response to each other choked any possibility of cooperation and growth --- but did it have to be that way?

The potential for creative competition and even cooperation could have grown in the soil of their lives had they chosen to give it a chance.

Last week I talked about an editorial by New York Times columnist David Brooks. I came upon another one this past week which made me think of this reading from Genesis. Brooks was writing about a story in the current issue of The Atlantic by Joshua Wolf Shenk who described how Paul McCartney and John Lennon created music together:

*“McCartney was meticulous while Lennon was chaotic. McCartney emerged out of a sunny pop tradition. Lennon emerged out of an angst-ridden rebel tradition. Lennon wrote the song “Help” while in the throes of depression. The song originally had a slow, moaning sound. McCartney suggested a lighthearted counter melody that fundamentally changed and improved the nature of the piece.”*

Now maybe because McCartney and Lennon were not birth brothers it made it easier to work through their differences and even use them for creative genius! But it is a wonderful example of how the seeds of relationship can grow when the soil in which it lands is receptive, even when differences abound.

Brooks central thesis in his article is that the lone genius is really a myth. He believes that ultimately we really need each other; that most genius is at least done in pairs or teams. I quote: “We have all known fertile opposites who completed each other – when they weren’t trying to destroy each other.” He goes on to say, and I would agree – that the Lennon-McCartney story illustrates the key feature in creativity; is the joining of the unlike to create harmony...It is usually the clash of two value systems or traditions, which, in collision, create a transcendent third thing.

I like to think that could have been the case with Esau and Jacob or that it could be the case with Palestine and Israel today. Did God really intend Esau and Jacob to be enemies or did the story get written after the fact to let us humans off the hook? (“God made us this way” as if conflict was our destiny.)

Our human tendency is to stay away from our polar opposites or make an enemy of them rather than tend the soil of a healthy relationship. It is difficult to believe that we might

actually complete each other! Democrats and Republicans; the religious right and the religious left – complete each other --- create a transcendent third thing? McCartney and Lennon had a tendency to rip at each other, but each knew ultimately that he needed the other. (Brooks)

The Generous Sower randomly and even haphazardly throws the seeds of relationship, the potential of creative cooperation, everywhere without any preparation of the soil in which they will land. Right here in our own congregation the Generous Sower sows seeds of potential relationship, community; and creative cooperation – how those seeds will “take”; what kind of soil they will find to grow in, is up to us.

Scott and I were talking this week about the quartet that has come together to sing this summer. Two women, two men – all of differing ages and places on their journey; Kristie and Cindy are quite new to our congregation, Roger has been here for a long time – Scott, for ten years and then coming together as altos and bases and sopranos to make such beautiful music, is a wonderful expression of creative cooperation. No one particular person was in charge – they found their way together each using their unique gifts – I would say they arrived at a “transcendent third place” and in singing, brought us with them. I give thanks for how this happens in a variety of places in this congregation as we worked together again to host Mary’s Place, as the Facilities committee works to care for the building and grounds; and even in the slow creation of a peace bird taking shape in our parlor for the Magnolia parade.

In a small church like ours our very survival depends on our willingness to make conscious choices about how we care for one another and how we shape our ministry together. God the Generous Sower throws out the seeds of creative potential in this place and we bring our unique gifts and dreams together in the soil of relationship with the ultimate goal being the discovery of that transcendent “third way”. We need those who have seen many seasons of growth and harvest, barrenness and death to keep tilling the soil of faith and service. We need those of us who are new – who are unsure – who question the purpose of the institutional church, that consider themselves more “spiritual than religious”, to risk being in relationship with this thing called “church”. Like McCartney and Lennon we need the meticulous and the

chaotic, we need the organized and the disorganized; the joyful and the depressed – and together we find community and till the soil of creativity and faith that God has so generously sown here.

Amen.