

GENESIS 25:19-34

PSALM 119:105-112

ROMANS 8:1-11

MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 16, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

### ***Dysfunction Junction?***

**The story begins like the plotline used in the making of untold movies or perhaps a made for television drama! It is a tale of two brothers, siblings who are in many ways attached at the hip, uh, the heel, and yet are as far apart as they can be. Many of us can relate! Not since Abraham and Isaac, Cain and Abel, in a murderous scenario that ended very badly, especially for the youngest, Jacob and Esau are as different as night and day, total opposites whose relationship deteriorated, according to biblical lore, their brotherly competition, the ultimate sibling rivalry, devolving over a bowl of soup, a hearty stew, some pottage, what the writer of Genesis disgustingly describes as “red stuff.” Gruel! It’s what’s for dinner! Gross! Frankly, if your familial birthright, a sacred privilege that comes with lineage as the first born, is worth nothing more than a bowl of Campbell’s then you deserve to lose it and perhaps should not have been bequeathed such an honor, such a trust, in the first place. Food for a day or blessing and wealth for a lifetime! Me eat now, regret later! How shortsighted and stupid! Frankly, if you would dare betray your brother, in need, in his moment of weakness, your hungry, famished, starving, brother in such an egregiously greedy way, as lacking in generosity as you could be, shame on you. This is not the way to live out of your abundance, your blessing, and good fortune. Welcome to the adventures of Jacob and Esau, twins born to Rebekah and Isaac. This screwed up clan represents the best, an excellent, perhaps quintessential, example of a dysfunctional family unit, yes,**

dysfunction junction! And, while we only have the beginning of their sordid story in our reading for today, we know that many twists and turns will follow that reveal a most distrusting and dysfunctional family, two seeds that refuse to grow in the same pot. Plot twist extraordinaire! This story of biblical proportions is a reminder that the one with the pot of gold, in this case a pot of stew, wins!

And speaking of seeds, my favorite Baptist denominational branch is called **“Two Seed in the Spirit Predestinarian Baptists,”** a sectarian branch similar to **Primitive Baptists,** their long name an absolute mouthful if ever there was one. The irony is that most Baptists have nothing to do with predestination. Don't believe in it! Want no part of it! But I digress; I often do! You see, the theory behind this movement, if you could call it that, conceived and taught by Elder Daniel Parker way back in the day in the early nineteenth century revival era, is that all persons are born of either **“good seed of God”** or the spawn, the **“bad seed of Satan,”** a Calvinistic belief that throughout human history there have been and always will be those who are the **“elect”** and the unlucky, misfortunate ones who are the **“non-elect,”** a ticket to heaven or hell guaranteed either way, an **unchangeable, unalterable, fate predetermined by God, yes, predestination on steroids.** I can hear it now! **“Hello all you children out there in radio land, coming to you live! Tonight, we are going to talk about two seeds in the Spirit, the good ones, and the bad ones. Every eye, purse, and wallet open, every mind closed!”** Maybe not! Despite the two-seed crowd never gaining widespread popularity it did take root, though it is now only manifest in four loosely related and isolated, all but dead, name only, churches. One day I foresee a road trip if they last that long! Now back to our story! **In the sagas of Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, and subsequently in Jacob and Esau, and countless brother and sister pairings throughout history, it is as if old preacher Parker was on to something, might have been right after all, in his bizarre theory that some are just born good and some are just born bad, and no amount of psychotherapeutic initiatives will ever change their evil, wicked, stripes. Not so fast! So where in the world are we going with all this pointless information? Well, I am glad that you asked that question and we will**

**figure it out together as we travel another sermonical journey as pastor and people this morning.**

**Today we look at a story that gives us a refresher course, a reminder, maybe a dose of smelling salts, perhaps some preventive maintenance, some castor oil with our spoon full of sugar, as we ponder the fragility of all our relationships, specifically considering the friendships in this fellowship we choose, as beloved faith community, as a family of faith, as local missional church, in which we live and move and have our being, right here, right now, in this very place, gathered as one in this sacred space. Together we live by covenant, collaborative in every imaginative way, never dictated by coercion or command, hostage taking within the system never needed to satisfy a solitary concern.** As the apostle Paul says today in Romans, “How the way we live is based on the Spirit, not based on selfishness! People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace.” So, it is in our lives and in our world and yes, within our church! We value the individual while we live as a group, knowing the tension therein! Yes, we gladly, willingly, get to choose our communal, our corporate, interactions, never coerced, never manipulated. We live by a level of trust, a high level of trust. And we never take our sacred bonds for granted, never naively assuming that everything will always come up roses because we are so beautifully and wonderfully faithful, to God, to neighbor, and to self. We all know from painful experiences that life just does not work that way. Neither does church! There always will be new challenges and difficulties, many brought about by the changing tides of societal restlessness, rough waters confronting us amidst our smooth sailing, frustrations sometimes voiced and sometimes not. Every day we are learning what it means to be church together, building a better stewarded ship as we go, doing the necessary reformation that goes hand-in-hand with an ever-evolving identity. To use an absolutely worn-out image, we are building this plane while it is in the air, yes, while we are flying it. We are prone to mistakes, to err as human because we are not divine, always in need of not only God’s

forgiveness and grace, but the reciprocal grace from one another that is imperative if we are going to live together as the people of God, the gathered church right here and right now assembled within these walls whenever we gratefully, gloriously, graciously gather in these holy moments of our lives, basking in all our wondrously connected relationships.

**But we are a long way from finished with the nightmare that is the story of Jacob and Esau, the slightly younger brother screwing over his barely elder sibling. It was not enough that Jacob the backstabber hoodwinked Esau out of his entitled birthright during the long formative period of their childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood, but as we find them later in life, another “misadventuresome”, made up word, theft is in the offing. As their father Isaac was slipping away into the clutches of death, Jacob, the sinister and not so amateur conniver, along with a lot of help from his meddling “favoritist”, mother, made up word, Jacob would go about the business of outright steal his brother’s rightful blessing, another entitlement decreed to the eldest son. Jacob had intent! Jacob had motive! As the story goes, Isaac had requested that the eldest son go into the field and kill something good, anticipating that after this sumptuously delicious and gamey meal that father would bless Esau with the coveted blessing of a lifetime, a reward for being the eldest. You remember the story. Isaac was almost if not totally blind, dependent on his sense of smell and touch to determine his immediate reality. Rebekah, knowing the end was near for her beloved, hatched a brilliant plan. While Esau was out hunting, his usual forte, Rebekah told little Jacob to go to the herd and pick out two of the finest and she would prepare a savory meal as the two scheming plotters prepared to dupe old Isaac, yes, one of the three patriarchs including this deceitful son. Fearing that Isaac would immediately know the difference between his hairy boy Esau and his smooth-skinned Jacob, Jacob put on some of Esau’s clothes to cover his smell and covered his body with the skins of the pick of the herd. Multipurpose animal husbandry! Literally, Jacob and Rebekah pulled the wool over Isaac’s visually challenged eyes! What a perfect cover! Isaac, incapacitated by his physical limitations, never knew the difference between the meal or in his sons, and blessed Jacob with the blessing once and solely reserved for**

**Esau, an action that could not be canceled or revoked, no returns, never taken away in any way. For years Jacob would be on the run, ironically hunted like an animal, wrestling with God, knowing his deceit and perhaps his overwhelming guilt, his brother elsewhere dealing with his own bitterness, even daring to marry outside the tribe out of spite, just to prove a point. And yet, despite his anger, jaded as he no doubt was from a lifetime as the victim of bad behavior, and his obvious right to a just vindication, Esau worked through his pain, found forgiveness and eventually embraced his brother, a development, yes, an amazing reunion, that no doubt no one saw coming. Retribution, i.e., retributive justice, vengeance, never enters their story, a profound revelation of gracious love, blood thicker than water or spite.**

Every story that begins with a “once upon a time” does not always have a happy ending with a “they all lived happily ever after.” Sometimes the best love stories end in tragedy! Many, if not all of us, have endured the permanent pain, the schism, that comes with unresolvable conflict, with separation that sees no closure, no end in sight, including the kind of heartbreak that only comes with ultimate betrayal, that only happens when someone closest to you disappointingly lets you down or turns against you. **What we quickly learn, or at least better learn, is that all our multifaceted relationships are fragile, need constant care and attention, and yes, as we make our turn for home in this sermon, need tending like a garden. Human beings are more varied than all the seeds of the earth, each one unique, as unlimited as the birth rate allows. Each and every seed, every human being, has the capacity for good and bad, the best and the worst, the least and the greatest. We do not live in isolation, at least the large majority of us, and are dependent, codependent, and interdependent in ways that are the healthiest and unfortunately, at least sometimes the most toxic. Life is largely about our intersections, the ways we interact and crosspollinate! It is part and parcel of being human in our daily doing!**

Part of the challenge to unmask, to interpret and understand, what we call the parable of the seed, or is it the parable of the sower, this mystery character who sows, is that it is hard to tell if the emphasis is on the seed or

the sower. Small spoiler alert, I am assuming both/and, not either/or! In this rare parable from the Gospel of Matthew the writer is attempting to convey the idea that it indeed takes a village to bring a seed from germination to fruition. We all choose to be responsible for and to one another, each of us accountable to the larger group, the whole that is the local congregation. While the needs of one are always important, individual issues carefully considered, buoyed by an integrated sense of self among congregants, it is always the body politic, holistically bound to a graciously egalitarian and democratic system, honoring equity and equality as sacrosanct, the means that guides our journey together with never an end in sight. The focus is always on the trip and not the destination! In the context of the parable, the writer, reflecting Jesus' preaching and teaching, reminds the reader and hearer that outcomes commensurate with any individual or group are never assumed, never assured.

**As followers of Jesus, the bottom line is that we are all in this together, the way of Jesus being the loving tie that graciously binds us as one. In our own way we are no different, yes, the same as our forebears delightfully described early in the book of Acts, in that we hold certain and specific things in common. Today, it is not about "things," tangible things, as it was for those early Christian pilgrims, but rather it is about ethereal, mystical, spiritual, things, our beliefs, the gospel principles, imperatives for living, that motivate our integrity and our faith, yes, our theology, and almost equally important, our ecclesiology, the way we choose to congregationally, democratically, be in relationship, the way we choose to be the ecclesia, the local missional church together, always a part of the one, catholic, apostolic, universal Church. While the original writer of this ancient parable, including the way it was employed by the early Church with Jesus as spokesperson, the rabbi using the story to teach a salient point about evangelism, it can also be said, interpreted thusly, that each and every one of us has deeply embedded, beautifully imbued, within us, as a part of our emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual makeup, all these seed characteristics, constructs revealing our own unique DNA, all of it carefully but subtly described in this very detailed parable that includes Jesus' meticulous explanation. This story is a reminder of the desperate**

**need for nurture in our spiritual nature! Yes, ironically, somewhere within the depth of our being, but not as a matter of pre-election, predetermination, predestination, lies the good and bad and everything in between that makes us fully human. Yes, we, like famous Waffle House hashbrowns, for those who get this southern analogy, are scattered and smothered like the seed randomly and haphazardly tossed along the path. We are the rocky ground, stubborn, unyielding, soil in every way, some folks out there just not very deep! We are the thorny plants, sometimes choking the very life out of the very thing we aspire to be, the very desires of our hearts. Yes, we can be our own worst enemy. To steal a line from next week, we are both wheat and weeds, and sometimes it is hard to tell the difference! And yes, on our best days, in our best moments, we are all good soil, fertile, as would be stated elsewhere as the finest manure, and we are filled with possibility, the potential to be fruitful to the degree that we produce thirty, sixty, and even one hundred-fold. What a glorious return on God's investment in us! Our work product, our productivity, is all because of the grace, the very hand of the One who made and molded us with all the anticipation and expectation, the hopes and dreams for all of us human creations. Yes, a lot is anticipated and expected from us, yes, seeds one and all!**

**In our conflicted world, our disjointed nation, our divided Church, upper case "C", we choose to gather in this local outpost, this version, this manifestation, always taking the risk of being vulnerable community together.** While many circle their own wagons for safety and security, understandable in today's toxic climate, we do the opposite. Like concentric rings in a pond, we seek to be ever expanding, widening the tent as we go, hospitably welcoming and including with an unlimited invitation that is indeed risky, all the while hoping and praying as we go for God's guidance and grace. Yes, there but by the grace of God go us all! No matter the circumstances and situations that loom or threaten, no matter the scenarios that bring fear and anxiety, we are called to be the good seed of the gospel, sharing freely, boldly giving our testimony, proclaiming our prophetic witness, while offering cups of cold water in their unlimited forms in our efforts to meet the needs of a hurting world, here, there, and yonder, yes,

everywhere. It is the Great Commission, a Macedonian call, that has gone out since the time of the apostles followed on the heels by the Church Fathers and Mothers, yes, from the founding cornerstones laid by our forebears in the faith in the early Church. It is a clarion call to be heard among the cacophony of competing voices whose social agendas, political leanings, and religious persuasions, strangely articulated as oppressive theological psychobabble, utter nonsense when compared to the lovingly gracious and always giving way of Jesus. These voices are loud, echoing with the hollow sounds once described by the apostle Paul as sounding brass, as thin and tinny as a poorly crafted veneer, or as obnoxiously loud as deafening clanging symbols. **Yes, we are all seeds of one type or another, no doubt containing every variety that comes with our humanity, our human diversity. But we know which seeds we are called to be, seeds that germinate for good and prosper as gospel. In all our being and doing, may we become the seeds that make a difference, a positive difference, in our church, in this congregation, in our lives, individually and corporately, and in our world, even as we begin with the first perfect ring from a pebble tossed into a pond, a great analogy for a people living at the water's edge, here on the chain of lakes, right here in Eagle River, Wisconsin.**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and created us to be the good seed, every time, all the time! Amen and amen.**