

“How Odd of God to Chose the Sod”

“First, sell me your birthright.” Genesis 25:31. “For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.” Romans 8:2. “Those who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” Matthew 13:23.

Knowing and understanding the right thing to do and having the grace and power to do the same is a gift called wisdom. It is available to all. Last week, Paul in his wretchedness, identified and introduced us to the fact that there is often a gap between intention and action; reality and the ideal and between the plan and its execution. This week, we follow that thought through Esau selling his birthright for a little bread, pottage and lentil, Jesus’ parable of the different kinds of soil and Paul’s discussion of a mind set on the lower nature vs. a mind infused with the Spirit of God.

Monday afternoon, as I approached the dairy case in Overland’s Schnucks, I saw a young man who was around 19-21 years of age and a young lady who was barely out of her teens with a baby in a their basket. The little girl was simply stunningly gorgeous. She look healthy and securely contented. By the time I got up to the check out counter, the family was in front of me. I could not help but ask the age of the child. The father said that she was five months old that day. Then I observe the mother pulling out a WIC voucher to pay for two gallons of milk and some odds and ends. My first thoughts was could the father not pay for the groceries and what will happen to this child. More later.

I. Jacob, the Heel-Grabbing Contender-Genesis 25:19-34

The story of the birth, struggle and a traded birthright of Jacob and Esau is a story about a struggle of two nations even until today-the Arabs, or more correctly the Edomites, and the Israelis. It is also about the nature of two kinds of peoples, the passing on of a birthright to the destined heir and one way of looking at why some people seem to be gifted with a certain blessing while others are not. Is it due to their worth or their knowledge or their favor with God? Certainly, there are those who would say so. Nevertheless, I can not believe that a loving and just God could be so capricious. Esau, the hunter was beloved by his father and should have received the birthright. Jacob, the tent dweller was loved by his mother and wrestled the birthright from his older brother Esau.

This story reveals a reality that we all can attest to today. People have different preferences and talents like Esau’s hunting and Jacob’s being a home-body. Esau cared only about the thing that was immediately in front of him-filling his empty stomach. He had things laid out for himself by heritage and tradition. Jacob was looking toward his future and with Rebekah help and seemingly God’s favor, went out and struggled to secure a future for himself. Why that was the case is a riddle, perhaps with modern parallels.

I do not know the answer to the riddle as to why people are differently blessings, for seemingly no obvious reason. What I do know is that in the story of Esau and Jacob, Jacob was the chosen one to live into the covenant that God made between himself and Abraham. Several things are evident. 1. Fathers had absolute power and control over the life and

death of their children. 2. Birthrights were usually reserved for the elder sons. 3. Contrary to ancient customs, however, the story of the Hebrew people is a story of the underdog, of the least likely to be chosen: an Abraham, a Isaac, a Jacob, a Moses, a David, a Judah, an Isaiah, an Amos and a Jesus of Nazareth. 4. I do know this, each of us has to play the hand that we were dealt in life. Kenny Rogers sings, “You have to know when to hold them, know when to fold them, know when to walk away and know when to run.” And if each plays her/his hand well that is all that is required. Each will receive a reward. Some people play it well and push the limits, others do not.

One the one hand, I have to ask you, is a willingness on the parts of some poor to maximize debt any different from Esau’s hunger which jeopardizing his future birthright? The indebtedness to such poor people is overwhelming or they get caught up into the criminal justice system for life. Our prisons, besides being places for harden criminals, are full of persons who have sold their birthrights in order to survive. On the other hand, is predatory lending, although legal, any different than the taking of a birthright from people who can least afford it? The lenders must know full well that criminalization and repossessions will be the inevitable consequences for their clients. Do they really care? Does the American society have any responsibility to protect the vulnerable from predacious lenders? And is not our society, by the way it operates, often a modern parallel of the Jacob and Esau story.

II. Four Different Kinds of Sod-Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

In the parable of the sower, Jesus tells of four kinds of soil upon which the word of God falls: footpath soil, stony soil, thistle soil and good soil. Then he explained what happens to the word of God in each. Some hear the word of God, do not understand it and the evil one snatches it away easily. Some upon hearing the word of God are enthusiastic about it at first but the glow does not last. It doesn’t last because their soil is not stable. Their interest and attention span are short lived. A third group is involved in so many things. The word of God can never take root in them because too many other interests get in the way. Lastly, there are those who make ideal soil for the word of God. The word might not sprout immediately in them like in the footpath soil. They might not be as initially excited as with the stony soil. They might not have the broad interests as with the thistle soil, but the word does sink in, takes root and grows steadily.

Now the bad news is that so many of us are like one of those first three kinds of soil. That is the way we are and we usually stay that way all of our lives. Perhaps Esau like was that. There is good news, however, the word of God can and does grow in each of these kinds of soils. The footpath soil can be kept malleable. The stony soil can be rid of some of the stones and mixed with fertile soil. The thistle soil can be constantly weeded. After all, Jesus doesn’t care whether we yield a hundred, sixty or thirtyfold if we are producing the maximum yield according to our individual capacities. That is why Jesus told the parables of the different kinds of invested talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and about the five groups of workers in the rich man’s vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Each was rewarded according to his/her investment and each earned her/his day’s pay in God’s kingdom. Perhaps Jacob’s bad soil was redeemable because Jacob’s struggle with God allowed God to worked with

his soil.

Another way of looking at the parable of the different kinds of soil is to realize that each of us has all four kinds of soil within ourselves from time to time. Admitting that should give us the incentive to seek God's help in becoming better as we pray *"Grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them."*

III. The God Prepared Sod. Romans 8:1-11

We do not have control of the status and conditions under which we were born as the little baby that I saw in Schnucks. Nevertheless, there is a domain that we can control. God has given each of us free will. Paul contended that there were two laws by which we can be governed: the law of our lower nature or the law of God's Spirit. We can choose to be led by the Spirit of God or elect to remain a slave of our lower nature. It is all a matter of where we focus our minds, souls and spirits. We can focus on things that are contrary to God's law, hostile to God with a mind on earthly things. That will lead to a lack of control, bad choices and a bad end. But thanks be to God, we can set our minds of that which is of God, good choices and leads to abundant life here and in the age to come.

Paul reminded his Roman hearers that they, because of their baptism, were no longer governed by their lower natures. They had the indwelling Spirit of God within themselves. But that Spirit had to be activated. They had to reach out and grab hold of it and let it guide them. That is why, even this morning, we pray to know and understand the right things to do and for the grace and power to do them. We can, by God's grace, determine our destiny. That was true of Esau and his uncle Ishmael before him. God did not abandon them. They played the hand that they were dealt to the best of their abilities and were blessed to become great nations in their own right. That is also a possibility for the poor person trying to get out of poverty and of the lender who tries to help the poor person to lift herself to become self sufficient. Paul, therefore, concluded, *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in you."* Romans 8:11.

We have looked at the story of the traded birthright and its aftermath. We concluded that we must make the best of the hand with which we were dealt. As a society, we must constantly seek to create a fair, just, loving society and a level playing field. We have learned, this morning, that we can improve the different kinds of soil for receptivity to the God's word and we can choose to learn from the word of God, while being guided by the Spirit of God within us. God, being a loving and a good God, gives each and all of us an opportunity to use our free will for the good. And when we do reach in and extend the blessing outward, we will not go unrewarded. May you be good soil for God.

Now back to the young family in Schnucks. As I said, my first thought was what will happen to this beautiful child? Of course, I had made a prejudgement about the couple. I had assumed that the father could not afford to pay for the groceries. That might not have been the case. Upon a closer look, both parents were tastefully dressed with no signs of coming from several generations of public assistance. I was proud that we live in a country where such a family can get assistance from programs like WIC so that the baby does not

have to be nutritionally malnourished. And just maybe, they have a family or a village that will support them and their little one toward a better life for themselves. Out of such soil as this, we might get a rocket scientist or someone who will find a cure for cancer. How odd of God to chose the sod!

Let us pray. O God of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau; of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and of good seed and good soil: Grant us the knowledge and understanding to do the right thing and the grace, power and wisdom to do the same. We pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.