

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Genesis 25:19-34

^{25:19} These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²² The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³ And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." ²⁴ When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. ²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰ Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) ³¹ Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³² Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Commentary

What's in a name? Maybe nothing, but ancient people believed that the name said something important about the nature and character of a person. Jacob means "he grabs by the heel"—in short form, "grabber." He came out of the womb gripping his older brother's heel and he continued to grab—at wealth, position, love—for most of his life. Esau seemed to act on impulse, while Jacob looked out for the long-term payoff. When a person such as Esau, who as impatient and needed instant gratification, meets up with a schemer like Jacob, guess who usually comes up short? That happened here. He asked Esau to sign away his inheritance in

exchange for a meal. In that ancient, nomadic culture, birthright was an important issue. The oldest son was entitled to the family name, a double share of the family wealth, and (in his case) the right for the covenant to pass through him. Fortunately for the long term, God was also working in this equation. The Bible tells us Jacob was the one God had chosen to be bearer of the covenant.

Reflection

Jacob “grabbed” at an opportunity presented to him, but he also took advantage of his brother when he was in a weakened position. When is “grabbing” just being alert, and when does it become exploitation?

Romans 8:1-11

^{8:1} There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ 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 also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Commentary

Paul has been talking about the struggle between the longing to do right and the compulsion to do wrong. Now he moves beyond that to declare that the Spirit gives us victory over the law of sin and death. Jesus, as a human being, lived the life that God intended for humans to live and became a new head for humanity. Christ's obedience and perfection made all life new. His crucifixion was important, but it was not the whole story. Jesus' whole life, from birth to resurrection, was the pivotal moment in history, the scene of great victory over sin and death. Paul's admonition to the Romans is, “join the winning team.” Jesus' resurrection has shown that the ultimate victor in the struggle between good and evil is God.

Reflection

It was Jesus' life, rather than death, that brought about the work of salvation. Is that a new idea for you? How do you react to that statement?

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

^{13:1} That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!"

^{13:18} "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Commentary

Jesus usually did not explain his parables; they were so obvious no one could miss the point. Hearers who did not understand were not spiritually alive enough to respond anyway. But this one he explains—to the disciples. Between the time Jesus told this parable and the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the church began to interpret the parable allegorically. In the interpretation, the emphasis is no longer on the harvest but on the soil. The different kinds of soil where the seed has landed has now become symbols for different kinds of responses to the words spoken by Jesus (and the apostles?). For Matthew, the shift of emphasis from the sowing to the soil pushes the hearer, the disciple, to take responsibility for producing fruit.

Reflection

What is your relationship with the Sower?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 119:105-112

^{119:105} Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

¹⁰⁶ I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.

¹⁰⁷ I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.

¹⁰⁸ Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances.

¹⁰⁹ I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

¹¹⁰ The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.

¹¹¹ Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

¹¹² I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.