

Genesis 25:21-34
Matthew 13:1-9

SCATTERED FAR AND WIDE

My favorite uncle growing up was my dad's twin bother. Uncle Barry and Dad were identical twins in every respect. They looked exactly alike, talked alike, shared many mannerisms and qualities, and had the same kind of zany humor. The family and close friends could usually identify them but neighbors and acquaintances really struggled to tell them apart. One time I was driving home from my daily commute to the University of Missouri at St. Louis, and I decided to stop along the way and see my grandmother, who was in the hospital. I just made it onto the crowded elevator when I heard a voice say, "Hello, young man." Due to the number of people wedged into the elevator, I couldn't turn completely around; instead, I glanced over my shoulder, caught a glimpse of the person who had called out to me, and said "Oh, hi Dad." The voice from the back of the elevator responded "I'm not your dad; I'm your uncle!" To this day, I can still recall the number of puzzled looks and raised eyebrows Uncle Barry and I got from all those other folks, who shared that elevator ride with us.

By contrast, in the Genesis passage, we meet up with Esau and Jacob, who were fraternal twins, and they had very little in common except for their parents, Isaac and Rebekah. We learn from the text that, when Rebekah finally conceived after much prayer, the children struggled constantly within her womb. The Lord told Rebekah that the "in-house" fighting was but a prelude to what would follow for she carried two future nations within her; both boys would give rise to two peoples, who would be divided and not united. "One shall be stronger than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger."

The twin boys were different in appearance from the start. At birth, Esau came first and he was red and hairy. Jacob was a close second; in fact, he entered the world grasping Esau's heel, presumably trying to supplant Esau for the right to be the firstborn son. The two boys grew to be men of different temperaments. Esau became a skilled hunter, who physically loved to roam the great outdoors. Jacob, on the other hand, was quiet; he preferred living in tents and being settled down as a herdsman-farmer. To make matters worse in terms of differences, their father, Isaac, loved Esau more because he was fond of the wild game that Esau hunted, killed, and brought home for dinner. However, their mother, Rebekah, loved Jacob more and favored him for they were kindred spirits.

Let me pause here for just a moment and say, "Parents, don't try this at home! This is one of the best, proven methods I know of to ensure that you create a polarized and dysfunctional family beset with monumental problems with far-reaching consequences! Don't play favorites! While each child is unique, love each and every one of your children the same – not in terms of a percentage of your love, but rather, with all the love you are capable of giving. That latter approach leads to a healthier family environment, whereas loving one child over the other is doomed from the start!

Now then, let's get back to Esau and Jacob. Given all their many differences in being and doing, the stage was set for further conflict. Jacob was far from perfect, even though he was the one chosen by God through whom the covenant would be fulfilled. Jacob was a conniver; he knew exactly what he was doing! It wasn't a coincidence that Jacob had cooked up some delicious smelling stew when Esau came home empty-handed and famished from a long day's hunt. Esau demanded that his brother hand over some of the stew. Jacob agreed, on one condition; he would trade his stew for Esau's rights as the firstborn. Esau basically said, "I'm starving! What good is a birthright if I die of hunger?" Jacob made Esau swear to the agreement. Esau was so hungry (and, I'm quite sure the tantalizing smell of that bubbling stew didn't help matters any) that he agreed to the deal. Jacob gave him bread and lentil stew in exchange for Esau's birthright, which meant that Esau passed over to Jacob the right to be the head of the family and guaranteed Jacob a double portion of the inheritance. Also, the birthright transaction ensured that Jacob, and not Esau, would inherit God's blessing to Abraham and would become the spiritual leader of the family as well.

That's the end of the story for now but trust that the brothers' relationship would become far worse before it ever took a turn for the better; eight more chapters in Genesis will need to pass by before there was any attempt at reconciliation. What, then, can we glean from this tragic passage of two brothers (and, two parents) at odds with each other?

Someone has offered that this ancient story reveals the way in which Esau was so ready to sacrifice his future for present needs and desires. It has been suggested that the soup represents our material lives and the birthright is symbolic of our spiritual lives. Thus, Esau represents our craving for material

comforts and gains in the present that may lead us to sacrifice our spiritual growth in the future. (Stephen Stanley, *Discovering Genesis 25-50*, p. 22)

While there is certainly some truth to that idea, let us not lose sight of the fact that both Esau and Jacob were real scoundrels, which was greatly compounded by their parents' favoritism. One wasn't totally at fault and the other was innocent and pure; each one was deeply flawed. There was a blend of good and bad within each one of them, just as there is within us. What I have come to understand from my reflection on the passage is that this story is more about God than it is Jacob or Esau. Although Rebekah was barren in old age, God kept the divine promise alive and opened up the future with the gift of the two sons. And, notice that the text does not say that God set up the circumstances whereby Esau's birthright was transferred to Jacob. Esau had only his slow wit to blame. But, God worked within this circumstance to affect the divine blessing. Which is to say that neither sin nor error can ever overturn or thwart the plan of God. Nothing, but nothing, can hinder or defeat what God has set in motion. God's will will win out despite our best efforts to achieve the contrary. Case in point: the crucifixion of Jesus didn't hinder God's will; it only served to enhance God's desire to save the world.

That's good news for you and me because we have done our fair share to prohibit God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven through our own brand of sinfulness. I take great comfort in knowing that, when I am at my worst, God, who is always at his best, can "trump" my flaws and still bring about the divine purpose in the world. Although we are not always "on the same page as God," God still works ceaselessly within us, through us, or despite us to bless and redeem the world. The Gospel reading for today is the very familiar story Jesus told, which we know as the Parable of the Sower. Traditionally speaking, the four types of soils have represented different types of people and how they react to hearing the Word of God. Or, the various soils have symbolized the variety of ways that each one of us hears and responds to God's Word; while at times we are good soil, which is receptive to hearing and doing the Word of the Lord, at other times, we are hardened pathways, rocky and shallow receptacles, and/or thorn-infested soils.

However, in recent times, we are reminded that this is the Parable of the Sower and not the soils! Rightly understood then, the focus is neither on others nor us but, once again, on God! Jesus is telling us that God flings seed anywhere and everywhere. And, while some seeds land on the sidewalk, or the gutter, and other seeds end up in the beaks of birds or among the rocks and thorns, nevertheless, God has more than enough seed to spread around. And for those seeds that hit the mark and find their way to fertile soil (or, fertile minds open to the Word of God!), there is an abundant harvest like you cannot believe – one grain produces one hundred more, or, at the very least, sixty or thirty other grains. That's quite a return on God's investment.

And, if we listen to what Jesus is saying to us as well through this parable, we discover that God is scattering the seeds of grace far and wide in our lives. Everywhere we turn, we are being bombarded by God's goodness. God's grace is not only amazing; it is unending, overflowing, overwhelming, and bountiful all at the same time. God's grace is both abundant and eternal, present day and everlasting.

And remember this lesson from the Genesis passage – if God can use those two squabbling brothers and their dysfunctional family, then surely God can use us as well! In fact, I think God "seeds" the world with you and me and many others. God liberally scatters us far and wide in the hope that we will take root, germinate, and bear much fruit (a bountiful harvest!) for God's kingdom in the world. And, even if we do not do our part, our best, to further Christ's ministry, somehow, someday, God will still find a way to bring about the divine purpose. How much better to be in partnership with God!

Edgar Mitchell was one of the astronauts whose lives were transformed by space flight. In February 1971, Edgar Mitchell looked out of his space capsule and beheld the earth as few have ever seen it, floating in the immensity of space, the incredible beauty of a blue and white jewel set amidst the vast blackness of the sky. He wrote that he underwent a religious experience up there. He said, "The presence of God became real, and I knew that life was not just an accident but that it had meaning and direction and unseen dimension behind the visible creation and that some ultimate design and purpose must be working itself out." And then he thought, "What is life really like on the planet today? I realized at that very moment people were fighting wars and committing murders, lying, cheating, struggling for power, abusing the environment, acting out of lust and greed, hurting others through intolerance and prejudice and bigotry." "Somehow," Edgar Mitchell said, "in spite of all that, an ultimate good would triumph, that we would be freed from our narrow existence and be given a vision of what is possible for human life on the planet." At that very moment, Edgar Mitchell resolved to devote the rest of his life to that task. (Source unknown)

Although those sentiments were voiced thirty-seven years ago, they are still true today. God used that scheming rascal, Jacob, to be the means by which Abraham's and Sarah's promise of a great nation would be realized and fulfilled in order to bless all of the families of the earth. Furthermore, God desires and needs you and me to be like seeds, which are scattered far and wide, to bear the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others in this part of the world. Let us give our best to God and others. Let us sow seeds of compassion, inclusion, tolerance, justice, peace, and, most of all, love. Then, let us leave the rest up to God, trusting that God will bring forth an abundant harvest – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens - First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA - July 13, 2008)