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Lesson: Genesis 25:19-34 // Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When 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. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet 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. ²²As 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. ²³But 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.”

“We have the same birthday,” was the straightforward yet slightly confused answer that my twins would give whenever someone asked them which one of them was older. That was the case for over six years. But somehow recently it dawned on them that one of them must be that little bit

older. “We aren’t telling you,” is the response their mother and I have given them. “When will you tell us?” was the pleading reply.

“We will tell you if you can go for one year without fighting.” That clock keeps getting reset, almost daily. You can only imagine how valuable this truth is in our parental toolbox, so I ask that if you are in the know, please don’t spoil it for us. The twins have argued back, “But you need to tell us, because you might forget!” No, that’s not something a parent forgets. We recently saw a video of a set of twins – boy and girl – who didn’t know which was older until there was a big reveal at their combined 21st birthday party. Once the truth was made known, that brother and sister didn’t fight. They embraced each other with huge smiles and happy tears as scores of family and friends erupted in applause.

When Rebekah was suffering during her pregnancy and she cried out, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” I wonder how things would differ if instead of God answering her, someone like Larry David was there who said, “Eh... just don’t tell them who is older.” Rebekah and Isaac would look at each other, nod together in agreement, and – boom – suddenly her suffering resolves. The boys are born, Isaac and Rebekah leverage their knowledge to dissuade the boys from fighting, the family never has any disputes, and world history is forever changed. The end.

Instead, Isaac and Rebekah spilled the beans. Of course that was because the blessing of the birthright was so important in that day and age. The story plays out as though Esau and Jacob had no option but to be in conflict. Then there is the detail tossed out at us that says Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob. This family has its share of dysfunctions: they don’t always get along, they take sides, and it seems that personal ambitions often override the desire for concord within the home. Seeing a family operate like this, I honestly think we as readers are supposed to respond: “Oh... I’ve seen this before. The fighting. The butting of heads. I get it.” Every family throughout time has had to deal with these realities. The extent of our discord may or may not reach the levels as we find in this story, but there has been and likely always will be a baseline level of conflict within households. We will hear more about Jacob and his conflicts next week, but for now we should recognize that this story puts this family’s conflicts out there for everyone to see. Yet that does not stop God from working in and through this family.

That is the never-ending surprise: God working with what is broken. There have been countless times that I have needed to check myself and remember that God can work through the imperfect. It's not like hosting a dinner party for a lot of people where we have to get the lawn mowed, the home arranged perfectly, the table set, the food ready to go, and only then when everything is perfect will God make an appearance. Rather, God is that friend who asks if they can help you get ready for your party, they break their back with you getting stuff done, and when the hour arrives they do all the behind the scenes work. Then this friend named God sticks around to help clean up. The thought of how much work they put into you sinks in, but before you can say anything, God gives you a smile and says, "Things don't need to be perfect for me to show up. I just wanted to spend some time with you." God can work through the imperfect. God's best work is through the imperfect, and that is grace.

Jesus tells a parable today about living in that grace. Too often we read this parable of the seeds landing on various types of soil, and our go-to answer is, "Be the good soil." Okay... what does that mean? If I were to say "be good soil," you might nod your heads in approval in these pews, but what does being good soil look like once we leave this space? It is easy to read this parable individualistically, but we must remember that parables about the reign of God are meant to be read, understood, and applied communally. What might that look like with today's parable? Well, does every faith community – like All Saints – have the potential to have a mixture of these soil types at any given time? Yes. At any given time within a congregation there can be "the seed that falls on the path" ... people who hear the good news but fail to understand the message of God's reign. At any given time within a congregation there can be "the seed that lands on rocky ground" ... people whose initial enthusiasm has difficulty surviving once adversity is met. At any given time within a congregation there can be "the seed that finds its way in thorns"... this is when concerns, anxieties, or even greed begin to stifle faithfulness. Finally, at any given time within a congregation there can be "the seed that lands on good soil" ... which cultivates faithfulness. The parable says that even though only one quarter of the seed reaches its intended purpose, the yield is exponentially more than the seed that was spread.

You and I can find ourselves being any of those soils at any time. Right now, I'm kind of a rocky soil, because any adversity of late tends to take the wind out of my sails. It's okay... we can be honest with ourselves. What is good news is that there are good soil people in this community who help me out and build me up to be good soil again. Sometimes those same people might find themselves to be rocky soil, or thorny, or the beaten path. When that is so, others in the community can help them out. The good news is that God provides good soil people to help out. God carries the community faithfully in its work to live in the kingdom.

The grace in this is that we don't always need to have our act together perfectly. God is still going to show up and help us out, even if you or I am feeling less like saints and more like Jacob and Esau. What this parable asks of us as a congregation is, "What practices help in time to cultivate good soil? What will help people develop a deeper rooted faith so that adversities, anxieties, and personal greeds don't win out in the end? What practices will help develop a deep trust that this reign-of-God thing is something that we should allow to govern our lives, so that love for God and others is our governing ethic?" We as a congregation will be exploring this more in our "Blessed to be a Blessing" sessions in August.

As a whole, we are never going to "be perfect" and be 100% good soil. That notion of perfection is a Greek concept more than it is a Hebrew one. For instance, God calls creation "good" and is delighted and satisfied by it. We too should operate with that standard, rather than only finding delight and satisfaction when "perfection" is somehow achieved. We have a God who keeps showing up like a friend, who does the hard work in communities like our own and in complex people like us to cultivate some soil that can be called "good." God is delighted to do that work, and to spend that time with us, because ultimately this work yields a bountiful crop of love for God, and love for our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen.