

“Seedy Scriptures”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

e-Worship @Facebook Live

10:30 am, July 12, 2020

Genesis 25:19-34

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Everyone loves a good story. That’s why this story of Jacob and Esau has stood out in my imagination since I was a child-- especially as a child. I knew how it felt to have my identity pegged for me from the moment I came out of the womb. Because Jacob and Esau struggled so much in Rebekah’s womb that it made her question her will to live, The Lord predicted, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.” My conception surprised and postponed my parents’ plan for a divorce; a good part about that is that I tend to care deeply about how to find common ground with people who want very different things. As the middle child, I knew how it felt to compare myself to my siblings, and jockey for our parents’ attention and affirmation. Like Esau, food might have been my weakness. As a young child, my mom used to bring me to the free picnics in Piedmont Park, to hear the Atlanta Symphony perform. Everyone would be out with their blankets and picnics, and I used to wander from blanket to blanket, eating whatever people would give me-- this was the early 80’s, and people were much more trusting. However, I had some food sensitivities and so this grazing would later cause stomach problems. So, my mom had someone airbrush a t-shirt with a cartoon character that said, “Please don’t feed me!” and that became my Symphony Summer Series attire.

Poor Esau, who was born red and hairy, a real man of the earth and a brawny hunter, driven by his hunger, had no one to warn him before it was too late: **don’t eat the red stew!** Esau, whose very name means *red*, was driven by his passions, and a single moment of desire for his favorite stew overrode his common sense when his conniving brother Jacob sold the food to him for the price of his birthright.

Although they had been born twins, Esau had been born first-- and yet, Jacob was grabbing his heel as he followed his brother out, already striving to be first. Scripture tells us that Isaac, the father, loved Esau, because he was fond of the hunt; but Rebekah, the mom, loved Jacob. Maybe Rebekah kept her favored son nearby while she was cooking, which then would have been considered women’s work; maybe Jacob helped her chop onions and press olives into oil, choosing just the right spices to give that red stew the kind of kick a brother would yearn for.

These twins acted as if they were born into an economy of scarcity: not enough stew, not enough food, not enough honor, not enough blessing, not enough approval from a parent-- and so, they felt the need to grab what they wanted before it slipped out of their reach. The bible mentions that before she conceived the twins, their mother Rebekah was barren-- which repeats

the theme from the previous generation, when Sarah was barren so used her slave Hagar to bear Abraham's first son. Perhaps Rebekah's sons learned to see the landscape as barren, and therefore needed to grab the fruits they desired, when they were available, lest they not have it in dryer times. If this was an inherited skill, it served Joseph in the next generation well, as he was the steward who preserved and stored food during the 7 years of plenty, and became a very powerful man during the following 7 years of famine when he controlled the availability of that substance so vital to life-- again, it goes back to the food.

We have an increased sense of how precious food has become during this time of pandemic. We are so much more thoughtful about planning our trips to the grocery stores, to extend our food longer so we can limit our visits to the store, and hopefully our exposure to the virus. Some order online; older members have had neighbors or family who kindly shop for them, and I know that some of you have made shopping trips to help those who cannot safely get to the store. Grocery workers have been elevated to the status of "essential workers," though their pay and benefits still do not reflect the risks they have shouldered or their value to our community survival.

Some people have been growing their own food in little urban gardens; thanks to Chris' care, we now have kale, lettuce, a beanstalk wrapping its embrace around the rails of our back porch, all kinds of herbs, as well as a number of green tomatoes that with the sun's kiss will soon blush red. I know a few of you are even more serious, and have been busy in Leonia's Community Garden, with some donating the produce to survivors of relationship violence receiving shelter in our neighborhood. These foods help nurture and sustain-- as well as reconnect us with the rhythms of God's creation, even in these times of chaos.

It was *not* the most nurturing ground to extend the roots and branches of the family tree that would become the 12 Tribes of Israel; nevertheless, the covenant God made with Jacob and Esau's grandfather, Abraham, came to be fulfilled: through Jacob, whose name meant "*he supplants, or overthrows*" and who was later blessed with the name Israel, which means "*struggles with God*," a great nation indeed grew from the earth and reached toward the heavens, its seed to become as numerous as the stars.

Jesus has a powerful message for us in our gospel parable about what makes for good, nurturing soil. Another early memory I have from childhood was eating an apple, and biting into the core, revealing the apple's seeds. I felt one of the seeds had gone into my mouth, and so I plucked it out of my mouth and flung it onto the paved sidewalk of my apartment complex. The next morning I ran out to the front stoop, looking to see if an apple tree had grown. Not only was there no tree; there was no longer any evidence that the seed had been there at all. My sister Alice, who was and remains 5 years older than me, chastised me in her infinite wisdom. Of course a seed won't grow from a sidewalk! You have to bury it into the earth for it to grow! We can all see the truth of why a seed thrown onto the hardened pathway won't take root, and will only be eaten by birds. Likewise, when we do not seek understanding for God's word, it slips away from us.

The seed that was sown on rocky ground, well that is like those who want fast-food faith. That is, immediate satisfaction. Quick and easy, and with dramatic results. Yet, this is nothing that can nourish and sustain for a long time. Do you know people like that, who hunger and thirst for a spirituality that can immediately satisfy, but when God gets quiet, they just move on to the next thing?

The seed that was thrown among the thorns gets choked by them; these thorns represent the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These days, it seems like I hear a strong voice saying, it's better to be the thorn that takes over than to be the weak seed struggling to survive. Beware; if you listen to that voice, you lose both your humanity and that chance to foster seeds of the Spirit that may ripen into good fruit.

Finally, we hear of the good soil. The seed planted there brought forth fruit and yield, 30, 60, a hundredfold. Of course, Jesus wants us to tend our soil so that it can be good soil, so that when that seed scatters, we will have fruits to show for the Sower's work.

And there is an important message there: what do we need to do to tend our soil? What rocks need removing? Where are the weeds growing? What thorns need to be cut away? There is a powerful message here about how important self-care is, for how well the gospel will take root in us. I know I have regular practices I do-- call it spiritual grooming if you will-- that helps me test the soil, find the best sunlight, get to water when I need it, and so forth. Some have a more difficult task than others-- where one person may have a few small pebbles, others have huge boulders they need to remove; some may be planted near a stream, while others are in a desert and are dying of thirst.

But lest this gospel passage turn into a morality tale about keeping your yards neat and trimmed, let me suggest that it is so much more than that. Notice in this parable that the Sower just flings the seed out, without abandon. The Sower is not counting the seeds. He is not judging whether the soil is going to work out. He is not worried about waste. He just scatters the seed, on and on, as if there is a limitless supply: on the path. On the rocky soil. Right in the midst of the thorns. And yeah, on the good soil too. You see, this Sower has been around long enough to see that sometimes something good can grow even in the most unexpected places.

When we first moved to Leonia, Suzanne Broffman's husband Ali got us set up with some backyard gardening. He even supplied us with a starter can of compost, from which we could generate our own dirt, as we added our own banana peels and coffee grounds. In one of the front barrel planters that held flowers, we were surprised when a squash plant started to creep out of it. Ali explained that we had found a *volunteer*-- that is, from the bucket of rot we had been keeping for soil, a discarded seed had brought a new generation of life from a squash.

That's how God's word can work. So maybe you don't get to church regularly, even when we aren't in a pandemic. Maybe you don't know where to find Micah in the bible, or even if it is in

the Old Testament or the New. Maybe there are weeds and thorns and rot in your soil and it just feels too overwhelming to clear it out. There was a lot of rot in Jacob and Esau's family, too. And yet... the grace of God's word is that its offer is persistent and the love it speaks of is abundant. Thank you, God, for a word so generous and abundant that it can take root, even when we are not the best of gardeners, or even when the soil we have been given seems as if nothing could possibly grow. By your Spirit, lead us to the waters and help us to till the soil; may our fruit draw butterflies and bees, to activate your word wherever else it might land. Amen.