

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
30 July 2017

Scripture readings:

Genesis 29:15-28 Psalm 105:1-11, 45b Romans 8:26-39 Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Having grown up with a mother who instructed me that if I did not use the packet of sugar in the restaurant where it was offered to me and took it home, I was stealing, I must confess to you that reading the lessons today makes me wonder whether or not it's good to read the Bible. There's an awful lot of crookedness going on in these lessons and certainly a bad attitude toward women as property, being used in trade, and certainly not encouragement to honest dealings even between men. I would really love to know what Rachel looked like. Fourteen years in a long time.

And then this whole collection of parabolic stories which no doubt somebody when they were sitting down to write what eventually became for us scripture, banged together. I think in seminary it's called a redactor, an editor, somebody who probably has had a bunch of snippets of scripture and passages of things that Jesus might have said ... "Oh well, these are all about seeds so we'll put them together." It's interesting the kind of shoot-yourself-in-the-foot candor at the end of the gospel lesson: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven has control of the story." That's essentially what's being told to us. "Here I am. I put these together. Now you need to be affected by my editorializing on these bits of scripture and things that Jesus has said."

We just came off of two weeks of stories about sowing seed, seed growing in good places and bad places. You know my feeling that those stories are really more about God than they are about people. We know about people pretty well, don't we? We all know we're pretty much schnooks at the bottom of it all. If you are *not* by nature sinful and unclean, you may go home now. You're wasting your time because that's not why we gather. But we do gather to think about what God might be like.

In the last couple of weeks we dealt with the idea that God was a very poor farmer. God does not plant carefully and God does not manage the seed of his good work, his love, the way we would. God spills his seed. There's a character in the Old Testament called Onan who spilled his seed and was criticized for that. And there's a joke about a woman who had a pet parrot named Onan because he kept spilling his seed. (*laughter*)

And here is God spilling his seed in places where it's not possibly going to grow very well - on rocky soil, on dry earth, among weeds. We also thought about the dandelion against which Chemlawn wages its war. As you know, I have a very different approach to the dandelion, it having been a symbol of affection between me as a penniless child and my mother. Those were the flowers I could afford to give her, and those are the flowers she continued to send me in my adulthood when she saw the first dandelion bloom in the spring. And those notes with those dried flowers are still in the bottom of my safe. I shared with you the fact that there is a dandelion flower in the bottom of each of my parents' graves. Dandelion is universally available. Pennsylvania Dutch people know you eat dandelion. It is nourishing in the spring. And there are those who are tricky enough to make wine from it.

After all of these stories about God's profligacy with God's love, God's not doing it the way we would do it - God loving not only our enemy but, if you can imagine it, God loving *us*! Then we come up against this whole string of about five parables that a redactor or editor or whoever the author of Matthew was, gave us, including one about the mustard seed being the smallest seed. Do you remember back in the fifties and sixties when women wore mustard seed jewelry? Ah yes, I'll bet you have some in the bottom of your jewelry box - a little glass ball with mustard seed in it and usually a very fine piece of jewelry, a bow pin or something.

Well, I have problems with that edge too. I've heard it over the forty-some years of my ministry. You've heard it too. You may have said it. I've probably said it myself. "I don't know what I would have done without my faith." Aren't you wonderful! Isn't your faith grand! And don't you do a great job about being religious.

Gag me!

There's a danger in that, and the danger is this: that I use my faith as my good work. I use my faith to prove that I'm better than you without faith. I use my faith to prove that I'm superior to you in your difficulty. *Yuck!*

There's an interesting sentence that comes from Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed in the small catechism. Lutherans, are you ready for a test? It's one of the most peculiar sentences in all of theological writing. Luther is talking about the third article of the creed. He begins by saying that I in my own reason and strength cannot believe. Well, that shoots your mustard seed right out the window. It's not your faith; it's God's gift to you for whatever reason. But you can't earn it, you didn't acquire it or deserve it, but you have it. It's yours and mine and it's free. The question is what are you going to do with it. Are you going to be the good kind of farmer you think everybody else is? Or are you going to listen to these parables which are told to stretch our imaginations to think the way God might think - that that love that God has for us, that gift of faith that God gives to us freely might be given to us to use the way God uses it, to spend it where the prospects of it thriving may not be very good at all, to spill it not only on rocky soil or dry soil or among the weeds, but even on the macadam parking lot in the city somewhere.

I will repeat the story from many years ago being in Italy in summer and seeing what I believed was a tomato plant growing out of the macadam on a train platform which was surely going to bear fruit despite all of the traffic, despite the poor conditions, but because probably of the husbandry of the station master. Nobody would tell you to plant your seeds in the macadam of a railway station platform, but there it grew!

And it's that kind of hope and belief in the love of God which we receive freely that I think St. Paul is getting at in the epistle lesson today. That's probably the passage of scripture I've read most in my life because I've buried more people than I have married, baptized and all the rest of it put together. This is usually a passage that is read at a funeral and usually under very, very strained circumstances because people just refuse to have their funerals in church. And so I would fight with the funeral director instead of the family, and I would say to the funeral director, "I know you can embalm a body in the church kitchen but you prefer to use your facilities for that. I can do a funeral in a funeral home but I prefer to use the church facilities for that." I can do a better job with the imagery and the relationship to the place and the altar and the Word that we share here on a regular basis.

Not that it can't be done. God's seed grows in the crack in the macadam of the train siding, but the point is this: we know ourselves and we've heard it said to us by others that there's a laundry list of excuses and reasons to prove that God does not love us. Paul knew what they were and in writing to the Romans he shared these. He's no fool. We're not going to pull the wood over Paul's eyes. "What will separate us from the love of Christ?" What, in fact, is the ultimate proof that God doesn't love you? Well, my car broke down this week. The guy on television will tell you if you're praying right and you're in a good relationship you'll get a pink Cadillac for it.

But that's not what Paul says. That's not what the Christian tradition says. The Christian tradition says you will have hard times, and they will look like "hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword." You will have every excuse in the world to say that God doesn't love you, but that's not because God doesn't love you. In the middle of all of the trials, our joys, our griefs, our addictions, our criminality, our sinfulness, our limitations, our humanity - we believe, teach and confess that God loves us because God loves us because God loves us, and nowhere in there is a shadow of the understanding that we deserve that.

I had a conversation over dinner this past week talking about a behavior that was taught to me by a pinched, score-keeping, crabby, cranky, virginal church lady who when I was a student on my internship in the South Bronx in New York City took me as her guest fourteen times to the Metropolitan Opera House. She continued to buy her mother's series. In those days a series was ten operas. She bought a double series. They were in the second last row in the peanut gallery. You could touch the ceiling! They were four dollar seats. But if I didn't thank her for that, I heard about it. It wasn't a bad lesson. In the end it became more important for me to learn that expressing my gratitude was more important to me than it was to her. I, by the way, am still in

touch with that woman who is deep into her nineties and living in the Godforsaken barrens of South Jersey somewhere.

Over dinner this past week I had a conversation about my peculiar habit of occasionally sending postcards and thank you notes. The discussion was is it more difficult to be generous than to be grateful. I was astounded at the conclusion reached by at least one of the people at the table: it's very difficult to be grateful. It's hard to write a note, hard to make a telephone call and say thank you. At first I was appalled by that, but it's true. It *does* take effort. And then as I was thinking about these lessons I thought how much more difficult it is to be God and to be all the time everywhere fully, entirely and completely generous.

I think we fail to give God credit for that. We think, "Oh, that's the nature of God. That's what God does. That's what God is like." Well, we must be very difficult to love, don't you think? We believe, teach and confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean and cannot save ourselves and that salvation is God's gift to us - just like our faith is God's gift to us. We believe and teach and confess that we cannot be our own reason or strength to believe, but we have been given this treasure in the face of all odds - persecution, nakedness, peril, sword, principalities, things present, things to come - even contemporary governments and politics. Could it have been worse in Laban and Jacob's day?

The pope, by the way, was extremely exercised about human trafficking in the Americas and paused and asked all to say the Hail Mary with him because this kind of human relationship continues and is accepted, and we are blind to it more often than not - the kind of relationship where you would go and copulate and not know with whom you were in bed or take somebody's freedom and use that person - usually a girl - for those purposes and your own benefit.

So here we are faced with these theological ideas of what God is like and what God's love is like. We don't really need to think too much about what we're like. All we have to do is go home and look in the mirror. If that's not good enough, read the law honestly, and if that doesn't work, read the law with a copy of Luther's catechism in the other hand. That'll do it. And then read the story of the life of Jesus who does absolutely nothing more or less than say to you, to me, to those with whom he lived, those who gave him life and those who took his life - said nothing more than this: Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing!

The rest is up to us. Will we bother to dial the phone? Will we bother to write the note? Will we bother to say thanks, or will that be more work than we think the Almighty has done in being generous? Amen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.