

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

**ACNA Readings** – Isaiah 55; Psalm 65; Romans 8:7-17; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

**Introduction.** The verb to invite in Hebrew is לְהַזְמִין *L'Haz'min*. It belongs in a verb grouping called 'Hif'il'. This group of Hebrew verbs denotes a causal action – an action you do that is caused by someone or something else. To be invited to something involves first someone inviting us and second our response to the invitation. An invitation is, by definition, participatory.

**Common Theme.** One common theme in our readings today is God's invitation and our response to that generous invitation to all people. The invitation from God is described by Isaiah as abundantly given without cost and by the parable of Jesus as good soil which produces a return in abundance.

**Genesis 25:19-34.** One of the effects of the Fall was an increase in difficulty for conception and childbirth (Gen 3:16). Despite the promise to Abraham for a multitude of descendants, the matriarchs of the Bible often had difficulty getting pregnant. One of the takeaways from this is that promises do not always come quickly and easily.

In the case of Isaac, the promise of a son only came through time and prayer. Isaac entreats the Lord on behalf of his wife, Rebekah, whom we discover is barren. The prayer was indeed answered, but it was some twenty years after the couple married. Of course, most of us would prefer immediate answers to prayer. The challenge is that when prayer is not instantly answered can we continue to be persistent in prayer and faith?

Rebekah ends up with twins, who will be the couple's only children. She notes something occurring in her womb and deduces an abnormal struggle between the siblings, leading her to seek counsel from God. This is the first occasion in the Bible in which Rebekah talks to God. Exactly how she inquires of the Lord is not explained; however, the verb – *to walk* – implies some sort of movement to a location. God's reply to Rebekah's inquiry is straightforward. She will have twins; they will both become nations, and the younger one will be greater than the older one, and prophetically the older one will serve the younger.

The biblical pattern is often one in which God chooses the younger family member, not the older one. Isaac is chosen over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Judah over Reuben; these are just a few examples. This theology continues into the New Testament, where the Orthodox Church maintains that Jesus is the younger brother and not the oldest, with Mary betrothed to the older widower Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This Orthodox tradition explains why Jesus, at the cross, has to ask a disciple to care for Mary and not rely on the other children as they are not biologically hers and have no legal obligation to provide support.

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As the children of Rebekah and Isaac grow, the text describes some dysfunction in the family. Each parent prefers a different child; this cannot bode well. Isaac prefers Esau, whom is described very negatively by Hebrews 12:16 as a fornicator and profane person. Jacob then reveals something about his character, which is also not positive; Jacob is a deceiver. He tricks Esau into giving away his birthright as the eldest child. Eventually, this deception will return to Jacob in a Hebraic concept of *מידה כנגד מידה* *measure for measure*, as he, too, is deceived by Laban into marrying Leah first and not Rachel and continues to be deceived by others in his life, which is hurtful and discouraging for him.

**Psalm 119:105-112.** Psalm 119 is an acrostic psalm in which each set of eight sentences begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. These eight verses comprise the letter *Nun* נ portion of the acrostic pattern.

The overall theme of the whole psalm is the prayer of one who seeks the counsel and wisdom of the Torah and intends to put its teaching into practice. The Torah is the teaching, guidance, and instruction from God to Israel for the formation of a moral, just, and holy society that would serve as a light to the nations. Moses declared on the eve of the conquest of Canaan that no other nation “has statutes and rules so righteous and fair as all this law – *Torah* – that I set before you today” (Deut 4:8).

The Word of God is a guiding light, described as a lamp for the feet. When we find ourselves in the inevitable darkness, it is best not to be without some form of light to keep from stumbling. Since we are all walking life's journey – although Paul describes it as a race – the question is: How then should believers walk before the Lord? The only way we can know how to walk before the Lord is from the information delivered to us through the Scriptures. How to walk humbly, how to act justly, and how to have mercy all come to us from the Word.

The psalmist asks the Lord to teach him the judgements of God. Where do we find those judgements, and how do we learn them? Only through the pages of sacred Scripture, through their study and application! Article six of the Articles of Religion echoes the psalmist in declaring that Holy Scriptures contain all that is necessary for salvation.

However, knowing the right thing to do is not the same as doing the right thing. And so the psalmist acknowledges that the testimony of God is in the psalmist's heart and then proclaims his intention to fulfil the Word of God. As the Epistle of James reminds us, faith without works is dead. Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it (Luke 11:28).

**Romans 8:1-17.** Romans chapter eight begins with a *therefore* – indicating that the conclusion presented is connected to the argument that preceded it, which is that the *Torah* – translated as Law – was not designed to save people from sin. When Israel were slaves in Egypt, they had no theological understanding of who God was and very little historical connection to him. They had no Bible, no

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Temple, no priest, and no prophet. All they knew about God came from oral *campfire* stories about a deity who made the world, a Flood narrative with a boat and a rainbow, then a wandering nomad, and now we are all in Egypt.

Moses does not give them the Torah and ask for their obedience on the condition that if they observe God's commands correctly, he will redeem them from Egypt. Instead, they are saved and redeemed from Egypt freely without much knowledge of who God was and without any observance of the Law.

This same theology is clear in New Testament when Paul writes, "while I was a sinner Christ died for me." During the Exodus from Egypt, a mixed multitude also joins the Hebrews in leaving. Thus salvation and redemption are available to Jews and Gentiles without observance of the Law. The Torah is given later at Sinai after the redemption.

What does the Torah do? The Torah reveals the character and heart of God, reveals sin, and guides us towards a moral, just, and loving life. What the Torah cannot do is defeat death or sin. To defeat sin and death God had to send Jesus. Faith in the Messiah is open to everyone – both Jews and Gentiles – with the Spirit dwelling in all believers. There is no condemnation before the Lord, and there should be no condemnation before each other. What should proceed now from the body of believers – both Jews and Gentiles – is the fruit of the Spirit that moves us to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col 1:10).

In verse 12, Paul says that we all have a debt to God but not according to any works of the flesh. Once again, it was never adherence to the Torah that brought redemption. Total adherence to Torah is impossible – for a multitude of reasons. None of which are the fault of the Torah itself. Sacrifices in Leviticus are only for unintentional sins. Only the sacrifice on Yom Kippur was for all the sins of Israel, and that was a once-a-year offering of the scapegoat.

The Jewish sages understood that repentance is required for all transgressions; thus, the debt accrued is a spiritual one. The Spirit provides guidance and strength, empowering us to accept or receive the free gifts of redemption as the people of God. The Spirit also provides the power to put the guidance and instructions of God – found in the Torah – into practice. Thus, walking in faith in the real world.

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.** The crowds that Jesus was attracting meant that new venues – other than houses and synagogues – needed to be found. Outdoor preaching was not a common event in Jewish history, but it was not without precedent, either. Many patriarchs and prophets made their proclamations in public outdoor forums before large crowds – including those in the apocryphal texts of the intertestamental period.

In our passage, Jesus teaches from a boat while the multitudes remain on the shore. I am uncertain of the acoustic advantage – maybe sound resonates off water really well – but there was definitely an amazing

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backdrop. Jesus sits while teaching, which is a long Jewish tradition. You stand to read the Bible and sit down to teach the Bible. The same pattern is seen in Luke four, where Jesus stands to read the Isaiah scroll and then sits down for his sermon.

On the boat, Jesus begins by teaching the people through a parable. The Hebrew word for parable is *marshal*, which means *example*. Parables create metaphors which assist in explaining a concept. They are a unique teaching device from the late Second Temple period. We only find them in the Synoptic gospels and rabbinic literature. Parables do not appear in the Gospel of John, the writings of Paul, or the Church Fathers. Of all the 436 parables in rabbinic literature, one interesting feature is that they are all in Hebrew. There are simply no parables in Greek or Aramaic. Thus – contrary to popular scholarship – it is probable based upon the evidence we have that Jesus was teaching in Hebrew.

Parables are also universal in scope; that is, they do not include any ethnic markers. The sower will go out and sow seed on the ground. The sower is not identified as a Jewish man, nor is the ground identified as a part of Israel. The message of parables is for everyone who can hear, both Jews and Gentiles. Parables often contain some sort of narrative shock to get people's attention and invoke inquisitiveness.

Here the farmer goes out to sow seed, and the shock is how he farms. Instead of being careful and particular in planting valuable seeds, he broadcasts the seeds over areas not conducive to farming. This lack of care begs the question: what is the farmer thinking? How careless of the farmer to spread precious seed on rocky, inhospitable soil where it would most likely not grow to maturity anyway! The shocking narrative invites the listener into the story, should they so choose.

Some of the interesting features of the parable of the sower are the use of the number *four*. There are *four* types of soils that the sower spreads his seed around. *Four* is an important number in the Jewish tradition. There are *four* cups of wine at Passover, the angels guarding the throne of God have *four* faces, *four* points to a compass, and *four* gospels in the New Testament.

According to early Jewish writings in the Pirke Avot – *the Ethics of the Fathers* – there are *four* types of disciples (Pirke Avot 5:15). The four types of students are those that are quick to learn and quick to forget, slow to learn and slow to forget, slow to learn and quick to forget, and quick to learn and slow to forget. The *four* soils correspond to the *four* types of disciples.

Jesus concludes the parable with the Hebrew idiom, “he who has ears, let him hear.” Unless you have a physical deformity or have suffered an accident, the majority of us have ears. What Jesus is saying is that much of the Word of God falls on deaf ears; we have to choose to hear and receive what God is saying. There are lots of voices speaking to us in this world, and most of them are not good. The voices are distractive, seductive, and entice us to follow the patterns of the world.

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In the parable, the farmer has an opponent – the birds of the air, which Jesus later defines as the Enemy. However, the *wicked one* cannot come and take away all the seeds the sower has spread, only those which have fallen onto a hardened heart.

One of the questions that arises from the teaching in this parable is: which voices will we choose to listen to? Once having listened, what then will be our response? The word *to hear* in Hebrew is also the Biblical word for *obey*. God willingly spreads his word far and wide, seeking for everyone to hear the good news. The seed is free and comes without a price, but it does require good soil and participation.

### ACNA Readings

**Isaiah 55.** Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord proclaims an invitation to come and enjoy an abundance of food for the body and forgiveness for the soul. The invitation is for everyone to participate in the everlasting covenant – characterized as the “sure mercies of David.”

The choice of the covenant being ascribed to David – from all the other characters available in the Bible – speaks volumes about the power of forgiveness. David – the adulterer, liar, and murderer – receives abundant mercy from the Lord, which demonstrates to the hearer the generous forgiveness included in God's invitation. If David can receive this sort of grace from God, then we can be assured of that mercy as well.

While the prophet addresses the people of Israel, the salvation call has universal scope. As in the Psalms, salvation is not only for the chosen people but is universal. That is, Gentiles have the same access to God's mercy. Psalm 117 is one of many examples involving Gentiles in the love of God. The invitation has a time element involved. The prophet impresses the call with urgency; “Seek the Lord while He may be found” (v.6). The invitation is not passive – as the call requires our participation. We have to return the call of the Lord and return to him.

The word *return* in verse seven is the root word for *repentance*. The promise to a repentant heart is that God will abundantly pardon. *Note that there is no mention of sacrifices having to be performed to receive the pardon.* Sacrifices also have their place in Scripture. The root word for *sacrifice* means *to draw close to*. The Temple ritual of sacrifice brought the people of God into the presence of God, which is the core purpose of the sacrificial system.

Returning to the Lord also involves hearing and study of the Word of God. Isaiah declares that God's Word will always accomplish the purposes of the Lord. When God's Word goes forth – through our proclamation of the Gospel or study of the Scriptures – it accomplishes what God desires not what we desire. God's Word does not always affect people or society the way we think it should. Even so, God's

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Word does not lack power – it always has the effect that God desires. One of the results is joy and peace for God's people. Isaiah concludes that the joy is so great that it affects the very creation as well.

**Psalm 65.** This psalm is attributed to King David and presents as a joyful thanksgiving hymn on the occasion of a fruitful harvest. God is credited with hearing the prayers of the people in verse two and visiting the earth with water in verse nine. The result is abundant fields and pastures in verses 12 and 13. This would have been a very appropriate psalm to pray during the harvest festival of Sukkot, which is the last grain harvest of the year before the harvest of winter stone fruits.

David intimates that the appropriate response to God's generosity and faithfulness is worship. David begins this psalm by declaring to the Lord that the praise and worship of the people was awaiting him in Zion – a synonym for Jerusalem. Indeed, the people of Israel had much to thank and praise God for. In this psalm, David extends the worship response to include all peoples – to the ends of the earth.

In the Book of Psalms, salvation and redemption are most often depicted as universal in scope – that is, open and available to everyone in the world. Verse two says that “all flesh” will come to the Lord. David also acknowledges an even deeper restoration and redemption than purely an abundant harvest. As Israel beseeched the Lord for a national agricultural blessing, David recognized the individual, personal struggle with sin (v.3) and how the Lord provided redemption there too – “atoning for the transgressions” of the people. How the atonement occurs is not explained; no sacrifices are mentioned that provide forgiveness. This demonstrates an understanding of the sacrificial system during the Second Temple period that acknowledges that the work of redemption comes from God and not the sacrifice of the worshipper.

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