

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
July 13, 2008

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

The Curse of Blessing

What do you look for when you come to church? There are all kinds of experts who write books, do lectures, and hold seminars, who are eager to tell us how to be a congregation that is attractive to people in our community. Later this year we will take some surveys, and gather for some group discussions, which will include this kind of analysis. Such analysis, market analysis if you will, can tell us what people in our community are seeking in a church, and what actions we might take to attract those seekers.

There must have been kingdom seekers in Jesus' day. Perhaps they would come out to where he was teaching and ask what kind of a kingdom he was offering. "Tell us, Jesus, what is the Kingdom of Heaven like?" or "Tell us Jesus, what is the Kingdom of God like?" I assume the presence of such questions, because Jesus is so often telling his hearers what that kingdom is like. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a sower ...." It sounds, though, that Jesus may not have done his market research as well as he should have, because he often says things that are not so appealing. Things like, "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother." I bet that one didn't make the top ten list of positive ways to achieve kingdom growth.

Take for instance the parable of the sower. The sower goes out to sow the seed. Some of you have planted gardens, if not this year at

least sometime in the past. You know the wonder of putting seed into the ground and waiting and hoping for it to sprout and grow and yield produce. So this sower sows his seed – not as carefully as you do, but he sows it. It sprouts and grows, at least some of it does. Some of it he threw on the road, and it didn't fare well. The birds got most of it, but the rest at least sprouted. Some of it however ended up in the rocks. It sprouted quickly enough, but it lacked sufficient soil and nutrition, and so it soon was scorched by the sun and died. Some more fell into a thorny thicket and was easily choked out. A few seeds did find good soil to take root in and they thrived. Indeed, they produced abundantly. "That is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like," said Jesus.

Whoa! Even before Jesus explains this parable, it doesn't take very much of a kingdom shopper to know that some pretty creative salesmanship may be required to sell this. I thought church was supposed to make life better, even make it wonderful. I thought church was about blessing, about feeling better after a difficult week, about getting answers to life's questions. I thought church was supposed to be a place of support and nurture and blessing.

What is all this about hard ground, rocks, scorching sun, thorns and thistles? The Kingdom of God is like this?

It really doesn't help when Jesus explains it either. He says it really isn't about the Kingdom, it's about you. Can you take it? Have you got what it takes to be part of this kingdom? If you don't understand what Jesus is teaching, you aren't going to make it. If you can't handle hard times, trouble, persecution – you aren't going to make it. If you're into comfort and ease, if you love wealth, you're not going to make it. But, if you are willing to listen and understand, if you are willing to endure, to put up with much difficulty, if you are willing to put the cause of the kingdom ahead of your own cares and desires, then you will be a good member of the kingdom; you will produce good kingdom fruit.

The way Jesus talks about it, the kingdom sounds more like a place of giving rather than receiving. It sounds more like a campaign for a cause, rather than a retreat. It sounds tough and challenging.

Well, perhaps that was just a bad day for Jesus. That can't really be what God's Kingdom is like! But I don't know. We also read from the first book of the Bible today. We read about the continuing unfolding of the blessing given to Abraham and his descendants. That sounds more like what we are interested in – blessing.

And right away in the reading it sounds better. Isaac prays for his wife Rebekah and his prayer is answered. Rebekah becomes pregnant – blessing! Life is good. But then just when we are breathing easy again, we find that Rebekah is pregnant with twins and even before they are born they are struggling with each other so violently within her womb that she wishes she were dead. Blessing?

Then they are born and she loves one, but the other is different. And to make matters worse, her husband, Isaac, loves the other one, but doesn't think too much of her favorite. Then it goes downhill from there. What began as a promise of blessing turns out at far too many places to be a difficult and even at times a sordid tale.

I was taught in seminary that there should always be some Gospel in every sermon – some good news. I suppose that remains true. If I want people to accept whatever message I seek to bring, there needs to be some incentive, some value in the message that attracts a positive response. The challenge of course is to accomplish that without pandering, without simply telling you what you want to hear.

Jesus seemed able to do that, at least for a few persons in his time. He was able to speak hard truths and yet gain acceptance. Of course he was also crucified; most ministers don't want to be quite that effective.

There is good news in this parable of Jesus. Those who hear and do, reap a bountiful harvest, but the hearing and the doing are not automatic, nor easy.

We are commissioning VIM this morning. Much hard work has brought you to this moment, and much hard work lies ahead. God's promise is a rich harvest of blessing not only for you, but for those to whom you are sent as you faithfully respond to God's call. Several of you have gone many times, so you know that not everything will go easily or smoothly. Thorns and thickets, hard soil, and burning sun are all part of the context into which you have been called. Blessing resides in the midst of difficulty.

It is the same for us as a congregation. Session has put together a good plan for our self study. We will have trained, effective help from our Presbytery staff. We will have access to comprehensive, detailed information about ourselves and our community, the kind of information that businesses pay thousands of dollars for on a regular basis to guide them in doing their marketing. We will have the information we need and a good process for digesting that information and building a good plan with it. All of that will be in place, but the question will still remain about our response. Will we be willing to pay the cost of seeking the blessing? Will we be good soil?

At the same time that we will be doing our self study, we will be engaging in two other very important processes. They will in large part be foundational for our ability to respond in faithfulness to whatever calling we hear from Christ as a result of our self study. These two processes will be our Stewardship campaign and

nominating officers for 2009. The Stewardship campaign has already begun with decisions asked of the Stewardship committee and now the session. It will soon be before you. The Nominating Committee will begin its work very shortly.

Those two campaigns will determine how fertile our soil will be. They both will require sacrificial response and commitment if we are to be a place of blessing.

Good news of the Gospel kind is not about always getting everything we want, easily and without any effort on our part. The good news of the Gospel is that as we allow ourselves to hear and understand Christ's call, as we allow ourselves to be formed into his likeness, our lives and the lives of many around us will be blessed. That message is as true today, here in Flemington, NJ as it was when Jesus first spoke it.

Thanks be to God!