**Sermon170716**

**St. Stephen’s, Seattle**

**Proper 10(A)**

**The Collect**

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

**Genesis 25:19-34**

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,

“Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;

the one shall be stronger than the other,   
the elder shall serve the younger.”

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

**Psalm 119:105-112 (St. Helena Psalter)**

Your word is a lantern to my feet / and a light upon my path.

I have sworn and am determined / to keep your righteous judgments.

I am deeply troubled; / preserve my life, O God, according to your word.

Accept, O God, the willing tribute of my lips, / and teach me your judgments.

My life is always in my hand, / yet I do not forget your law.

The wicked have set a trap for me, / but I have not strayed from your commandments.

Your decrees are my inheritance for ever; / truly, they are the joy of my heart.

I have applied my heart to fulfill your statutes / for ever and to the end.

### **Romans 8:1-11**

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

### **Matthew 13:1-9,18-23**

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

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

**Sermon**

Once again we find ourselves with passages about life and growth.

We’ve known each other for a while now;

perhaps you know my motto on this.

When dealing with life metaphors in the Bible,

we should always take them more literally.

So, in Matthew’s Gospel, we have a parable about our own spiritual life.

In my opinion, it’s one of the more transparent parables.

It appears in all three of the synoptic gospels.

And in all three, Jesus spells out the meaning.

God is sewing the Word in our hearts, the good news of Christ Jesus.

Why is it that the word grows and bears fruit for some, but not for others?

Though the seed is the same, the ground is different.

Though the word is the same, the hearts and minds are different.

Sometimes, the word does not even sink in.

It sits there on the surface of our hearts.

It finds no soil to sink into and so gets snatched away.

This seems very common to me.

I know many who have been to church, read the bible,

heard the word, but it means nothing to them.

Sometimes, the word finds a little bit of soil,

a little piece of our hearts where it can grow,

but it cannot grow fast enough,

and its roots can’t reach far enough,

so it doesn’t stand up to the weather.

The new plant fades away.

This also seems common to me.

I know people who were enthusiastic Christians,

but also Christians of convenience.

Their faith was not part of their life.

Or they identified very strongly with the church,

but could not engage their heart, or their mind, or their soul.

When their faith was tested by persecution or tragedy,

they could not hold on to a relationship with God.

Sometimes the word finds soil,

but it is not the only thing to grow within the heart.

Other loves and other faiths choke it out.

Jesus specifically mentions the love of wealth and power.

That, too, is a plant – one that can outcompete love of God and neighbor.

This is perhaps the most common of all:

when we truly have the option of deep faith,

but find it too hard to choose love over control

or attempted control of the world around us.

And, when everything goes, just right,

the seed lands on good soil.

It sinks in and grows and bears fruit.

Not just a little, but enough to feed multitudes.

A couple caveats should be mentioned here.

While this is about something very literally growing within us,

we must not read it too simply

or pass on too quickly.

We should let it take root properly in our hearts.

I think it applies to the whole of our lives;

the word takes root in us, or it does not.

It also applies to parts of our lives;

it may be that the word takes root in my heart, but not my mind, or vice versa.

Most of us have different aspects of our lives

and we can ask which have been fruitful, and which have not.

I would also note that Jesus nowhere says this is strictly our choice,

whether we want to be good soil or rocky.

Our will is a part of it.

We have the power to weed and tend.

We have the power to cultivate our hearts.

But we each struggle with the patch of land we’ve been given, as well.

We have some sway in our garden,

but we have sway in the gardens of others as well.

We play a role in the tilling and fertilizing,

picking up rocks and spreading weeds.

Christians who speak only of planting seeds

miss the depth and sophistication of our calling.

We live and work for our neighbors.

We bear fruit for our neighbors.

Just as we live by their labors.

Plant growth is an amazing and complicated process.

Did you know that almost no plant grows by itself?

What we think of as rich soil,

involves countless bacteria and fungi,

each contributing to the exchange of water and nutrients

between plant and environment.

One teaspoon of rich soil can contain more organisms

than there are people in the United States,

thousands of species of bacteria,

many yards of fungal filaments,

not to mention thousands of tiny worms and insects.

We usually speak of an ecosystem as patch of land –

a forest or a watershed, a swamp or a field –

but an ecosystem can also be a tiny web of life

smaller than your fingernail.

The God who made the stars also made tiny ecosystems

nearly everywhere on the surface of the Earth.

Plants need nitrogen but are generally bad at getting it.

They depend on fungi and bacteria to turn

elemental nitrogen (N2) in the air into usable forms.

In a healthy forest, water and nutrients can be shared underground

between different trunks, using a network of roots,

but also shuttling staples through other organisms.

Soil is not a simple matter.

And the soil of our hearts,

like the soil of our fields,

is connected.

So, we can ask about how we enrich our own hearts,

and the hearts of our neighbors.

And we can ask how we harm the soil

in ways that harm the whole ecosystem.

I find it troubling when people sow discord.

When they preach hatred, distrust, and fear,

when they encourage selfishness,

when they lie and cheat,

encouraging you to expect and even do the same,

these people are salting the soil.

It may not hurt them in their own field in their own lifetime –

usually it does, but even so –

it may not harm them directly, but it poisons the ecosystem.

All life is poorer.

The parable of the sower lays a burden upon us.

We are called to till and keep the garden.

I mean this quite literally, after Genesis 2:15.

One of our main purposes in life is to care for our ecosystem

in ways that only humans can.

I also mean it figuratively.

We are asked to plant and water,

to tend and harvest

the ecosystem of human souls.

We care for them, anticipate their needs,

and cultivate the fruits of the spirit

as God works in us light and life.

The church, like the bacteria and rhizomes,

is responsible for shuffling nutrients back and forth between the trunks.

We care for souls and see that they live well together.

We know about our bodily goods

and they cannot be ignored.

We literally must give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty,

space to the oppressed, light to those in darkness,

and care to the sick.

That mandate seems hard enough on its own,

but it is only the beginning of our task.

We also speak of spiritual goods.

They are less literal than food and water,

but they are less abstract than you might think.

Once we have an idea of spiritual growth,

of the seeds and fruits of God’s Spirit growing within us,

taking care of them becomes more obvious.

Rich soil of the heart happens when people have experienced

faith, hope, and love.

They are virtues, but always communal virtues.

It makes no sense to have faith, hope, or love alone.

We must have faith IN, hope FOR, and love OF others.

These virtues are shared from one soul to another.

Being loved, we understand love and can learn TO love.

We participate in faith, hope, and love,

first passively, but then, as we come to understand,

more and more actively.

A body is an organized composition made out of flesh.

A soul is body in the process of living.

And spirit – or breath or perhaps the Breath of God – is what activates souls.

Paul says “the body is dead; the spirit is life.”

Like any modern biologist,

he knows that the flesh cannot hold together by itself.

It needs breath and life to keep itself together.

(We might say metabolism,

while Paul would say soul,

but we’re both talking about blood and breath,

life in action.)

The soul or the spirit holds the flesh together as a body.

Literally.

What does it mean to be an organism,

if it doesn’t mean you are more than a collection of flesh?

You are a living, breathing, integrated thing.

You do stuff in the world.

If you focus on the flesh, it will not hold together,

because flesh just is. It does no work.

You must focus on that which enlivens the flesh.

Thus, the body is dead, but the spirit is life.

He does not say that the spirit is alive, but that it is life itself,

Specifically, in the context of the body.

That is how he can conclude with this:

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,

he who raised Christ from the dead

will give life to your mortal bodies also

through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

Alone we are nothing, we are dust and dirt.

When we maintain the ecosystem, when we act together in love,

when the Spirit of God stirs up the dust,

we become the soil in which life takes root.

And it all ties together, bodily and spiritual goods,

because this is where we find ourselves,

as physical organisms and as spiritual organisms,

in community.

We work together because we work together.

**An academic note**

For the brave of heart, I would like to add just a few words on flesh and spirit in Romans. This dichotomy seems to trip people up and it happens to be the subject of my current research. What exactly is Paul talking about? That’s been a subject of contention for two thousand years, but let me share with you my own understanding, in the hopes that it will be helpful.

Many in the Greek and Roman world, thought of our existence as a continuum, running from particular examples to universal principles. Matter and Form were not opposing armies, but part of a giant whirlwind. Matter simply means “the stuff of which a thing is made.” Meat is made of atoms, and organisms are made of meat, and communities are made of organisms. Matter isn’t a thing, it’s a relationship. Meat, or flesh, is the generic stuff of which animals are made. (“Tissue” might be a good scientific analog.)

A body is an organized composition made of flesh. This is exactly the way we use “body” for living things or “corpse” for dead things. It is shaped flesh. A “soul” is a body in the process of living – an active body. And “spirit” – or breath or perhaps the Breath of God – is what activates souls. (Spirit is the Latin word for breath.)

Paul may have been a Platonist. They thought that the spirit came first and drew matter to it, gradually moving the whole world from a state of disorganized stuff, to a state of perfect and animal-like harmony. Paul may have been more Epicurean. They thought that atoms came together in ways that led to organization. I suspect Paul was a Platonist – most early Christians were – but that is beside the point. Paul thought that the whole universe was moving from disorder and chaos (vanity and emptiness) to life and growth as an organized whole. Paul thought the cosmos groaned in travail, waiting to be born and grow into the full stature of Christ.

Paul says “the body is dead; the spirit is life.” Like any modern biologist, he knows that the flesh cannot hold together by itself. It needs breath and life to keep itself together. (We might say metabolism, while Paul would say nutrition or soul, but we’re both talking about blood and breath, water and nutrients moving around in an active body.) Spirit and soul, quite literally hold the flesh together as a body. What does it mean to be an organism, if it doesn’t mean you are more than a collection of flesh? You are a living, breathing, integrated thing. You do stuff in the world.