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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost 5/Proper 10/Year A/Genesis 25:19-34, Psalm 119:105-112, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

“Freedom from Quicksand”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

As many of you know, I worked in the mental health field for over thirty years, and, during that time, I saw many changes take place. One of the major shifts in that field in the second half of the twentieth century was the shift from the diagnosis and treatment of the individual person in isolation to the diagnosis and treatment of the individual within his or her social context, especially the family context. Many experts and practitioners in the field went so far as to refuse to treat the individual person and to limit their professional practices by refusing to even diagnose one individual—to call one person the identified patient with the problem—believing that strongly that illness or less than optimal functioning occurs within a context and that making changes within that context is the key to improved functioning and well-being. The term “dysfunctional family” became very popular, first within the field and then throughout the general public. Many clients would come in to see me for an initial session and say something like, “Well, I’m here to talk about the dysfunctional family that I grew up in.” The term came to be used so often that it began to fall more in the category of “popular jargon” rather than professional language. The T-shirt industry cashed in with quips like, “Who took the fun out of dysfunctional?”

The Bible is full of families that surely must make the Focus on the Family people shudder, and the book of Genesis is especially replete. In today’s reading, we are halfway through the book and already we have had a sibling murder, a drunken father, a wife who has

been passed off as a sister by her husband, two daughters seducing their father—and the list goes on and on. It’s amazing that Genesis even made it into the canon of the Bible or that we allow children to listen to its stories! It must be at least R-rated! In today’s reading we have the story of sibling rivalry that is so severe that it begins when the twins are still in the womb! Rebekah, the mother, is in such agony with their struggling inside her that she wonders if she can live through it. I doubt that even “Super-Nanny” would know how to intervene in this family! Isaac and Rebekah have never heard of the principles of raising children that we value today. The law says that the oldest son will inherit the family wealth, and beyond that, Isaac and Rebekah apparently think it is quite OK to play favorites among the children. Isaac prefers Esau, and Rebekah prefers Jacob. At some level, when we hear this story, we must be thinking, “What is wrong with these people?! They could at least try to hide their preferences!” Thank God for the field of psychology!

In these difficult but rich stories, the book of Genesis describes the human condition in all its rawness—all its fear—all its greed—all its pride—all its depravity and potential for depravity—all its lust—all its anxiety. The Old Testament spares nothing in describing how low we are capable of sinking.

We are always in need of being rescued from ourselves—of being snatched up and turned around and shown a better way—of being redeemed, reclaimed, pulled out of the jaws of darkness and despair that threaten to swallow us up.

Paul goes to great pains to describe how God does just that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul is the first and greatest theologian of all time. Countless books have been written about this one book—the letter to the Romans—the writing in which Paul makes his greatest effort to explain sin and salvation. He uses the word “sin” over and over. We

Episcopalians would rather not talk about it! But Paul doesn't use the word "sin" so much to talk about individual acts or breaking certain rules or engaging in "bad" behaviors. When Paul talks about "sin," he's talking about a larger overarching force at work in the world. He's talking about "evil"--something that pulls us away from God—something that mires us down and turns us in on ourselves—something that arouses the dark side and robs us of love and peace and joy. The image that comes to my mind is "quicksand." Remember the old movies or TV shows when someone is being chased through the jungle, and you know that the moment is coming when the person will step into quicksand—that moment of panic over being stuck and unable to move? And we who are watching are waiting to see whether the person will be rescued or sucked under and die. There is no way to free ourselves from that quicksand--from that sort of malevolent force.

In speaking of "sin," a theology scholar writes, "There seems to be a primordial, fatal attraction to the involuntary at the heart of human being, an abandoning of the human project, a death wish." He expands this to include all of nature in these words: "There appears to be a drift toward futility in nature, a waywardness, an undertow toward disintegration and destructiveness." (Peter Hodgson, Christian Faith, 88, 97) There is no way to disentangle ourselves from or will ourselves away from what Paul calls "sin." It is too powerful and too pervasive.

But Paul reminds us that we don't have to free ourselves, that we are only stuck because we've forgotten who we are. In Paul's words, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you...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.” At the very core of who we are dwells a Spirit that is powerful enough to raise the dead.

Maybe I’m too kind when it comes to Paul, but I really don’t think he is saying that our physical bodies are bad or evil. Flesh itself is not bad, contrary to what many religious people have thought over the centuries. I think Paul actually believes the opposite. After all, in the first letter to the Corinthians, he calls our bodies the “temples of God.” It doesn’t get much better than that! What Paul calls “living in the flesh” is living in ignorance of the fact that the Spirit of God indwells this fleshly body—living in a state of forgetfulness of our own holiness.

When we know that the Spirit of God lives in us now, we know that the kingdom of God is a present reality that we are called to live out in the here and now—that we are called to be always in a process of moving more fully into life in the kingdom. The kingdom of God is not something we only wait for beyond this earthly life. It is here and now, struggling to come into fruition through us. That is what “salvation” is—right here, right now—building the kingdom within and without.

In his parables, Jesus primarily focuses on talking to his followers and listeners about what that kingdom is like. The kingdom of God is always a bit mysterious and a bit surprising—often puzzling and confusing. And so Jesus has to almost tease us into understanding. The parable of the sower, told in the gospel of Mark and in today’s gospel from Matthew, is one of the few parables that Jesus explains to his listeners. He wants to be sure that they understand that he’s not giving them a lesson on agriculture. He knows that the idea of the kingdom of God is hard to understand—that, no matter how much he talks about it, not everyone will get it. And so he says to his listeners and to us, “Let my message sink in. Work at understanding it. Let it

be your one true thing. Don't let other things distract you. Keep your focus. God will work miracles through you.”

There is a miracle in this parable of the sower, and it is the miracle of the abundance of the harvest. Jesus isn't talking about just having a good growing season. He's talking about reaping a hundred times as much as a normal harvest—or sixty times as much—or at least thirty times as much—the kind of harvest that would make a big dent in the level of starvation that the world is experiencing today and is foreseeing at even greater levels. The kingdom of God is about abundance that is so overwhelming that it has to be shared and is shared so that all have enough. God is the greatest of givers. Giving is what God does—God gives and gives and gives. And when we open ourselves to receive what God so abundantly gives, we respond by giving as well. And the harvest is truly miraculous.

Let us pray.

“O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that (we) may know and understand what things (we) 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.” (BCP, 231)