

Ordinary Time 14

*Sunday between
July 3 and 9 inclusive*

The Old Testament lection for this week is the familiar story of Abraham's quest to find a bride for Isaac from among his own people. Narrative beauty and emotional drama are combined in this story, and the reader is touched by Abraham's need and by the sensitive response of Rebekah as well. Rebekah chooses to return with the servant, and in opting for Isaac she makes of herself the instrument for the preservation of the promise (Gen. 12:1-3). That which has been in danger is now saved, and the reader is reminded that God's declared intentions are sure.

Psalm 45, a hymn in honor of the marriage of the king, is apparently placed in the lectionary to match the passage from Gen. 24. Implicit in that text is the future birth of Jacob and the sustaining of the family and nation. In the psalm, reference is made to the sons who will become "princes in all the earth" (45:16). In both cases the marriage union is a special blessing, which gives the community a future and which evidences God's attentive blessing to this particular people.

Romans 7 depicts a battle, not of the nation Israel, but of human life. Here it is the strong desire to do good, to serve God rightly, that finds itself threatened by the enemy, sin, an enemy capable of perverting even the best of human motives and actions. On its own, humanity has not the strength to resist the overwhelming power of sin. Even the law of God can be used by sin for the destruction of humanity. Only God, here known through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can bring victory.

Of course, these "victories" are not always visible to the unassisted human eye. Who can see the defeat of sin? The prayer of Jesus in Matthew recalls that knowledge of such things comes, not to those who are intelligent by ordinary, human standards, but to those "infants" to whom God has granted revelation. Those who do enter into

Jesus' discipleship will find in their relationship to him a new understanding of power and of service.

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Genesis 24 is the story of Abraham's successful quest to find a wife for Isaac from among the ancestral family near Haran (note Gen. 11:31-32). It is an extended narrative, but the lectionary has pared it down to manageable size by a careful selection of verses.

In the portion of the story that precedes the verses chosen for the lectionary, Abraham has sent his servant (probably Eliezer mentioned in Gen. 15:2) to the homeland of his family in search of a bride for his heir. The seriousness of the mission is symbolized by the oath the servant takes (24:9), in which the loins of Abraham represent the reproductive power of the patriarch. In other words, this story is about the fulfillment of God's promise concerning the future of Abraham's family (Gen. 12:1-3).

The sheer beauty of the encounter at the well between the servant and Rebekah is matchless (24:10-27). The description of Rebekah's lovely appearance and her cooperative spirit is designed to elicit the hope within the reader that this is, indeed, the one who is to be Isaac's bride. And the manner in which the servant's prayer (vs. 12-14) is answered by the young woman's behavior serves as a strong signal that God is directing the course of events to their divinely intended purpose. The prayer of vs. 12-14 is balanced by the servant's second prayer (vs. 27), this time an expression of deep thanksgiving to Abraham's God.

Brother Laban's warm response to Rebekah's report of her encounter with Abraham's servant (vs. 28-33) sets the stage for the first section of Gen. 24 designated by the lectionary: vs. 34-38. Here the servant recapitulates what the reader has learned from vs. 1-9. The man emphasizes that Abraham's vast wealth has now become Isaac's, and that that fact is a blessing from Yahweh. But Yahweh's blessing also extends to Isaac's remarkable birth (v. 36). The logical consequence of these things is that the heir now needs a wife, in order that both wealth and family may be prolonged. Yet the servant is not innocent of the ways of the world. Neither extravagant wealth nor the wondrous power of God in giving Sarah a son in advanced age is proof that the woman whom the servant finds will cooperate with the purposes of his visit. It is a commentary on the text's high regard for women that unlike brides in some societies, both ancient

and modern, Rebekah cannot be coerced. If she will not accompany the servant back to Abraham in order to marry Isaac, then the servant is to leave her at home and to be free from his oath (v. 41).

That portion of the text chosen by the lectionary is joined again at v. 42. Here (vs. 42–49) the servant rehearses those events previously described in vs. 12–27. (It is this frequent repetition within the text that makes the selective method of the lectionary feasible.) The section concludes with an appeal by the servant that brother Laban and the father, Bethuel, may deal honorably with cousin Abraham. There is a sense in which v. 49 may seem to repeat a time-honored formula that often accompanied business transactions in the ancient world. Yet it is a formula often *dishonored* in practice, and thus there is a certain sincerity about it.

In vs. 50–51 Laban and Bethuel defer the matter to Rebekah herself. The men's view that "the thing comes from Yahweh" may seem to steal the issue, yet Rebekah is nonetheless allowed to speak for herself.

Verses 58–67 form the climax to the story. Rebekah chooses for Isaac, and preparations are made for the trip back to Canaan. The blessing of v. 60 may seem stereotypical, yet the reader knows that more is involved here than the perpetuation of a family dynasty. The "thousands of myriads" again sends our minds back to Gen. 12:1–3, and we, the readers, are assured that God's promises will be kept.

The final section, vs. 62–67, is appropriately touching. Isaac, who is walking outside in the cool of the day, sees the caravan approaching, while, for her part, Rebekah veils herself until the time appropriate for her to reveal her face. Isaac not only takes Rebekah for his wife, but "he loved her," a reference to not just a sexual union between the two, but a union of the "soul," as well. Rebekah's place in Isaac's heart is so great, in fact, that the blow occasioned by the death of Sarah is softened.

And so the promise is kept alive. It had been in danger through the barrenness of Sarah, but was redeemed by the birth of Isaac in Sarah's and Abraham's advanced age. It was in danger through Isaac's bachelorhood, but has now been renewed by God's gift of Rebekah. God's promises will not fail.

Psalm 45:10–17

Psalm 45 is commonly classified as a royal psalm. Moreover, it is commonly thought to be a poem concerning the pageantry of a royal wedding, the marriage of the king. The early part of the psalm (vs.

1–9) uses extravagant language to praise the king and to celebrate what is sure to be a successful, prosperous future.

As our reading begins at v. 10, "daughter" is addressed. It is not clear who this person is, except that she is the one whom the king "will desire," who will be the bride of the king. And because she is chosen by the king, she must decide to become a part of the king's household and entourage. She must leave her own family and enact loyalty to this regime. The last line of v. 10 uses words not unlike those spoken to Abraham in Gen. 12:1. Her departure and entrance are at the command of the king, and so are presented as the will of the royal God. In one of our own traditional wedding formulations, the bride is to "forsake all else" and "cleave to him only." Behind this formulation is likely the drama of a foreign princess making the drastic move of loyalty to a new royal regime.

Because she is the king's desire, two things are clear and sure. First, she is to be utterly obedient to the king, to regard him not first as husband, but as "lord" (v. 11b). Second, because she is the king's desire, the richest peoples, even of foreign lands like Tyre, will bring gifts of all kinds (vs. 12–13a). Clearly the wedding has important political dimensions, and so the gifts to the bride are homage to the king or part of royal bargaining and negotiation.

Now the poem breaks out in a lyrical description of the queen's procession as she enters the palace of the king with her own retinue (vs. 13b–14). She is dressed in rich robes of many colors. She leads a procession of attendant maids, who care for her and are her companions. The luxury of the scene, plus the mention of Tyre, leads one to imagine that this is a spectacular that might belong to the prestigious days of Solomon, and that the new queen is the daughter of a foreign king, indicating the preeminence of the king in Israel (cf. 1 Kings 3:1–2; 11:3). However, we are given no specific historical location for the event.

It is obvious that the real point of interest is the king, so in vs. 16–17 the poem returns to the king. It is clear that "the princess" exists in order to enhance the king. More specifically, "the princess" exists solely for the purpose of bearing children to the king, in order to guarantee the dynasty into the next generation. (Thus the "queen mother" is a dominant figure in the royal life of Israel, on which see, for example, 2 Kings 23:31, 36; 24:8, 18.) Because of the lovely, pedigreed princess, the king will have sons, and the king's name will be celebrated for a very long time to come.

This psalm is much neglected in church usage, and not without reason. Surely the psalm will be difficult to use in a social context like ours, which is attentive to issues of sexual discrimination and sexual

equity. It will, on the face of it, be offensive, first because the "daughter-princess" exists as a function for the well-being of the king and the dynasty and has no purpose of her own, but is to "bow to him" in obedience. Second, in that royal patriarchal society, only sons are valued, so that women exist to produce sons, a reality still operative in too much of the world.

Interpretation of this psalm will need to be done with great sensitivity to these issues. I suggest that the psalm might best be treated in relation to the Old Testament reading. The role of the woman and the significance of sons is that God's power for blessing is operative in the life of Israel, as the promise of God is thus kept intact and transmitted to the next generation. Even if such a theological affirmation is remote from royal intentionality in its "original usage," the outcome is that the community receives as God's gift well-being and life-power into the next generation. The decisive value of such a gift from God is no small matter in a society that either doubts the future or imagines its own control of that future. In this poem, the man and woman play their essential roles, but finally the birth of newness is an awesome gift of God's generosity.

Romans 7:15–25a

If preaching from texts that are unfamiliar and alien to congregations has its difficulties, preaching from highly familiar passages such as this one offers its own challenges. A survey of the great variety of interpretations of this passage, both scholarly and popular, would reveal that it functions for readers much like a Rorschach test: readers see in it what they bring to it. The reasons for this vast array of interpretations lie ready to hand. On the one hand, the passage itself contains a number of problems that make for conflicting readings of it: the identity of the speaker (the "I" of the passage, Paul's varying uses of the term "law," the relationship between the passage and the larger context. On the other hand, the passage stimulates a powerful sense of identification among many readers, and that sense of identification prompts interpretations that are highly individualistic.

Given this situation, clarity about Paul's intention will probably remain elusive. Is Paul speaking autobiographically, or is the "I" here the equivalent of "one," as seems to be the case in 1 Cor. 13? Does he refer to the period of his life prior to his own conversion, the time of his conversion, his life as a Christian, the time in human history before the coming of Jesus Christ? In all likelihood the answers to these questions will remain obscure, although the context makes

it unlikely that the "I" refers simply to Paul's own personal experience. Even if he includes himself within the "I," he refers to the experience of humankind.

Whatever the concrete autobiographical or historical details of the situation Paul has in mind, the passage stems from his prior remarks about the relationship between the law and sin. Given Paul's comments about the law earlier in this letter, readers or hearers of Paul's letter might conclude that the law itself is sinful (7:4). Paul strenuously objects to this possible conclusion, but he does concede that sin uses the law. Sin is capable of "seizing an opportunity in the commandment" (7:8, 11). Even if the law is "holy and just and good," sin is nevertheless able to employ that law to bring about its own evil ends.

Taking that observation as a starting point, Paul's primary concern in vs. 14–15 comes into view (though the actual lection text does not begin until v. 15). If sin can use God's law, twisting even God's law so that it leads to death, then sin's power can surely prevail over any human being, even one whose intentions and motives are good. If sin can use the law, which is spiritual, sin can even more readily invade the human being (7:14). The conflict Paul described in vs. 15–20 is a fundamental human conflict between willing and doing. Despite every good intention, every healthy resolution, every excellent desire, human beings find that they do not follow through on those plans: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." This state results, in Paul's analysis, not from some defect of character or some psychological burden, but from the omnipresence of sin ("sin that dwells within me," v. 20).

This description pertains not simply to all humanity, in that all have failed to acknowledge the existence and power of God (see, for example, Rom. 1:21), but especially to those who desire the good. Paul has in view here the religious person, the responsible member of the human community, the one who wants to be a contributing member of society. Despite every attempt to accomplish good for others and for self, the efforts of the religious person come to nothing. Ernst Käsemann succinctly summarized Paul's point in this passage: "What a person wants is salvation. What he creates is disaster" (*Commentary on Romans*; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, p. 203). Sin's power is such that it corrupts even the best instincts of the most faithful and religious person.

In contemporary North American Christianity, proclaiming this passage as a profound psychological insight would be relatively innocuous and even comforting ("How marvelous that Paul understood our problems!"). Acknowledging the power of sin to corrupt

human life, even religious human life, will prove to be more difficult—even offensive. Few faithful Christians relish the thought that their resolve to be good people nevertheless leads them into sin. To complicate matters further, as has often been pointed out, the topic of sin is itself offensive. Failures and shortcomings may be attributed to psychological problems or social contexts, but seldom if ever to the power of sin. Nevertheless, Romans relentlessly insists, not only in this passage but throughout the letter, that sin powerfully invades and controls human existence.

What is the remedy for this problem, if not more human resolve to do good, more human will? God has acted in Jesus Christ to free humanity from the power of sin. For those who are in Christ, there is “no condemnation” (8:1). No human initiative, no matter how good or forceful, can overcome the power of sin, but only God, who has already acted in Jesus Christ. That initiative of God’s enables human beings to live free of the paralyzing conflict Paul describes in Rom. 7, because they are confident that God has already acted to deliver them. They know that God can take their motives and actions, however flawed, and turn them into service of the good.

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

The designated Gospel reading for Proper 9 includes two slices of Matt. 11 that on the surface appear unrelated. The first slice is a parable about children who cannot agree on the games they play, and the stated application has to do with the reception given John the Baptist and Jesus (11:16–19). The second contains Jesus’ prayer reflecting on the mystery of divine revelation and an invitation to the tired and disillusioned to come to Jesus (vs. 25–30). But a probing of the two slices vindicates the decision of the lectionary committee to bring the two together for a single Sunday.

The parable depicts a generation that cannot come to grips with either John or Jesus. Children pipe happy songs and their friends refuse to dance; they play mournful tunes and their friends refuse to weep. The friends are totally unresponsive. They apparently have no intention of joining the music. John came as a sober figure, a teetotaler who ate a strange diet, and he was labeled demon-possessed. Jesus came as a convivial character, eating and drinking with all sorts of people, and he was dismissed as a glutton and a drunkard.

“This generation” has been given every opportunity to hear, but they refuse. Take the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (11:20–23). They are the privileged sites, where Jesus has done many

mighty works. Citizens have more than enough evidence to discern who he is. But instead of being moved by what they see, the citizens have remained blasé. Their resistance leaves them in a worse state than the pagan cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom.

Jesus’ prayer of thanksgiving stands in sharp contrast to the deafness and blindness of “this generation.” He thanks God for having revealed the truth to infants, meaning the unprivileged, tax collectors and sinners, the poor. By the context as well as vs. 25–26, the point is driven home that IQ and privileged education are no avenues to the knowledge of God. Revelation is God’s decision, and the divine preference is for the “infants.” But why?

The next verse (v. 27), with its complex Christology, provides an answer. Jesus, who is questioned by John the Baptist (11:2–3) and is rejected by the people from his own home territory (11:20–24; 13:54–58), is only known by the Father. The verb “know” in both Old and New Testaments, of course, means more than the act of intellectual perception; it includes the notions of choice and intimacy. The Father, in love, has “elected” the Son, and on the basis of this choice the Son “knows” the Father and can thus disclose the Father to whomever he chooses.

The exclusiveness of the relation of Father to Son reminds the readers that humans have no capacity of their own to fathom the knowledge of God. Neither the Father nor the Son is a genie to be controlled by human brilliance. God is known only as a gift of incredible grace. Even our efforts to know the Son only end up in images fashioned after ourselves. God simply eludes the human grasp.

Now this is precisely why the “infants” assume the place of divine favor. They make no pretense to knowledge. Whatever they have is given them. They are those who do not judge God by some preconceived criterion, those who (in Paul’s language) do not find the crucified Christ either a stumbling block or foolishness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–25). The “infants” are those who let God be God on God’s own terms.

The invitation (Matt. 11:28–30) appropriately brings the passage to a climax. Rather than make demands or lay ponderous loads on followers, the text summons readers to a discipleship that is easy and a burden that is light. (The Greek word rendered as “easy” carries also the connotation of “suitable, appropriate, easy to wear.”) The invited are, no less than the “infants,” now described as “you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.” Like the people of the street who are gathered at the last minute for the wedding feast (Matt. 22:9–10), these folk find the welcome almost too good to be true.

The offer is “rest,” the divine Sabbath—not, however, to be con-

strued as sheer passivity. In fact, the text is another call to discipleship. This schooling, however, is distinguished by the fact that it is not obedience to a code of external rules, but loyalty to a leader. "Learn from me" (the verb sharing the same root as the noun "disciple"), Jesus says. The weary are summoned to a new form of learning, in which the teacher is "gentle" (or "meek," as in 5:5; 21:5) and "humble in heart."

Alongside the warnings described in Matt. 10 of the costliness of following Jesus and the eventuality of conflict with the powers of this age, this passage needs to be set as a counterpoint, a reminder of the gracious Lord to be followed and the gentleness of his call.

PROPER 10

Ordinary Time 15

*Sunday between
July 10 and 16 inclus*

How wonderful and mysterious are the ways of God!

If there is one theme that might be said to characterize the foundations for this day, this might be it. The Old Testament lection from Gen. 25 marks the beginning of the narrative of Jacob's life. The passage is at one and the same time a story about Jacob and about Esau, but primarily it is a story about Jacob. Previously rehearsed themes are raised again (for example, the barrenness of the mother, the redemption by God of the promise to Abraham and Sarah, and the like), but perhaps that which stands out in sharpest relief is the election of Jacob to be the heir to the promise—Jacob, who has no claim to be the heir except that which the grace of God bestows on him.

The text from Ps. 119 represents one of the twenty-two sections from that psalm, each of which is devoted to one letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in this case the letter *nun*. Because of the literary constraints placed on the author (each of the eight lines in a section must begin with the same Hebrew letter), there is little room for theological or literary development. Rather, a single motif is announced: the result of trust in God is a life of joy and gladness.

Paul sets two polarities in Rom. 8:1–11: those who "live according to the flesh" and those who "live according to the Spirit." "Flesh" and "spirit" are not to be understood as two parts of the same person, but as a cosmic duality having to do with the rule of sin and the rule of God. In the end, those who would deny sin (the "flesh") and live for God (the "spirit") are able to do so only because the spirit (or the Spirit) is the free gift of God.

The parable of the sower and the seeds in Matt. 13 is an object lesson in the mysterious grace of God. The human heart may be stony or thorny or receptive, and will respond to the grace of God accordingly. But the seed has within it the power of new and rejuvenating life, so in the end the harvest is assured.