

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 inclusive*

How wonderful and mysterious are the ways of God!

If there is one theme that might be said to characterize the four lections 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.

Genesis 25:19–34

It is now Jacob's time in the ancestral story. Everything is ready for Jacob and his story, but the story does not begin as intended. In Genesis, Israel regularly has difficulty beginning the story of the next generation because the well-pedigreed mother is barren (v. 21; cf. 11:30; 29:31).

1. *The crisis of barrenness* is the beginning of Jacob's story (25:19–21). Everything is ready, but nothing works. The crisis turns out to be not a biological, but a theological crisis. Isaac is driven to prayer (v. 21). Isaac and Rebekah do not between them have the resources or the capability to generate their own future. They are required to assume a position of need and a voice of urgent petition.

The narrative is terse. Isaac prayed: Yahweh heard; Rebekah conceived. The prayer of Isaac is answered. Yahweh does for them what they cannot do for themselves. It is Yahweh who opens their future. The new narrative concerning Jacob is possible only because Yahweh gives good gifts in answer to petition.

2. *The gift of pregnancy is freighted with trouble and danger* (vs. 22–26). In v. 22 the narrative makes a leap. We know only of the conception. Now, without warning, it is "the children." There are two of them in the mother's womb. They "struggle." The verb is a strong one. They "crush" each other. There is violent conflict between the two already, before birth. Rebekah is troubled. She knows her condition is not as it should be. As did Isaac in v. 21, now Rebekah prays. She turns to the God whose pregnancy this is (cf. Num. 11:12). We are not told what she prayed. We are told only God's answer.

In response to her "inquiry," Yahweh now speaks (v. 23). Yahweh's answer in the form of a poetic oracle is the rhetorical center of our passage. Yahweh speaks ominous words. The two sons in the womb are in fact two nations, two peoples. They will be "divided," at odds, in tension. There will be an inversion: "The elder shall serve the younger"! The boys are not yet named or known. Even before birth, however, we know that Rebekah will bring into the world a scandalous, unnatural conflict, sure to be troublesome and fraught with unending vexation.

The oracle is laconic about the tension and the inversion. That tension could be one between two cultural inclinations, reflecting the victory of the tent dweller over the hunter (see v. 27). Perhaps the verdict reflects an ethnic agenda, that Israel will prevail over Edom, whose progenitor Esau is. Beyond the cultural and ethnic accents, the verdict in God's mouth has an important sociopolitical dimen-

sion. The oracle overturns the practice of primogeniture, the privilege and entitlement of the firstborn. This oracle, however, subverts that social convention and opens the way for the "last one" to become the "first one." The old, settled entitlements are questioned; new opportunity is legitimated for those conventionally unentitled.

Beyond the cultural, ethnic, and sociopolitical aspects of the oracle, however, we are confronted by a theological verdict in the mouth of God. The poem is a decree of Yahweh concerning the coming supremacy of Jacob, that is, of Israel. No reason is given and no justification is offered for Jacob's anticipated preeminence. On the one hand, the assertion concerns Yahweh's utter freedom to make and break. The new outcome is wrought by Yahweh's unfettered power. On the other hand, the oracle is an anticipation of what is to come later for Jacob. What Rebekah inquires about with God is now decreed as the shape and destiny of Jacob's life.

3. *We move quickly away from the birth* (vs. 27–34). Esau is hungry and wants to eat (vs. 29–30). Jacob has food and will share it with his brother, but only after he bargains. Jacob's demand is rigorous: "Sell me your birthright" (v. 31). The oracle of v. 23 had destined Jacob to preeminence, but it was only an oracle. In this episode, what has been decreed is *now given societal, legal embodiment*. The trade is made; Jacob is now entitled, and Esau is fed. Jacob has long-term entitlement, Esau has short-term satisfaction. The conclusion of the narrative is brusque. Jacob "went his way." He is on the move, in a hurry. Esau is not as easily disposed of by the narrative. Esau lingers in the last line, having given away his future.

The juxtaposition of oracle (v. 23) and narrative (vs. 29–34) is poignant. On the one hand, Jacob is given his singular destiny. On the other hand, Jacob acts by his own nerve to acquire what is not his. In the latter account, God is not visible or even mentioned. Jacob is on his own in his cunning. Except that Jacob is never on his own. He is a creature of his free, powerful, decisive God, the one who ended barrenness and caused birth, the one who ended primogeniture and entitled "the younger," the one who anticipates the narrative of barter.

Psalm 119:105–112

Psalm 119 is the longest in the Psalter and serves as a joyous affirmation of God's Torah. The psalm is an eightfold acrostic. That is, in Hebrew the first eight lines all begin with the first letter of the

alphabet, the second begin with the second letter, and so on. Our particular verses are the eight lines that begin with *nun* (=n). It is likely that the psalm is written in this tightly disciplined fashion so that the "medium" is a match for the "message." The message is that a Torah-obeying life is a *rightly ordered* life, and so the acrostic expresses a psalm that is *rightly ordered*. Unfortunately, that acrostic order is completely lost in English translation.

As with much of this psalm, our verses begin with a readiness to trust in and to obey God's command. The two words used here for the Torah are "word" and "ordinance." While "word" may elsewhere be more dynamic, this psalm reflects on the written word, in the world of the scribes. The "word" is the written set of commands. The written command, it is asserted, gives light and guidance for the journey of faith. It shows one what is safe, what is wise, where to stop—that is, how to act and what to do. The alternative to a Torah-governed life is a life "in the dark," without any guidance, so that one steps into all kinds of danger without having a clue. Moreover, these ordinances are "righteous," which means not only are they aimed at something "true," but they are active agents in providing a rightly ordered life, that is, ordered in tune with the intention of Yahweh and with the structure of God's created world.

In the midst of praise for the commands, vs. 107–108a break into a different pattern of rhetoric. First, in v. 107, there is a petitionary prayer that refers to affliction and then seeks to motivate God to action, the saving action that only God can do. That is, God is the giver of life and is asked to give life as God has promised.

The petition is promptly followed by an act of praise and a resolve to learn the commands (v. 108). This verse suggests that the prayer of v. 107 has been answered, and so the speaker moves toward a new life, new joy, and new resolve.

This prayer and praise is now followed by a second sequence of verses, which promise to obey (vs. 109–112). The speaker begins with an acknowledgment of having control of and responsibility for his own life. He is indeed a free agent, who can dispose of his own life as he chooses.

But as soon as the truth of autonomy is uttered, it is checked and corrected by remembering the Torah. The Torah gives anchor and shape to life beyond one's self, because one is in fact not free, and one is not capable of holding together one's own life.

This speaker does know about the temptation to reject the commands. Indeed, there are social pressures and social options that are persuasive and seductive. The "wicked" are those who have departed Torah obedience, and who believe that life is more effectively

lived without submitting to command. In Ps. 1, another Torah psalm closely linked to this one, the wicked give other advice and are said to be "scoffers and sinners," that is, those who ridicule a life of disciplined, intentional obedience. This psalmist, however, refuses such a snare and opts for obedience. As an alternative to such autonomy, this psalmist is deeply resolved to value God's decrees, to rejoice in them, and to take them with active seriousness all his life long.

This is not a terribly interesting psalm, as there is not much in it of drama or development. In fact, it is a "one idea" reading. But what an idea: that a life of joy comes from a ready trust in God's commands, which accepts God's commands as a covenantal shaping of reality!

One must take care that the use of this psalm does not collapse into easy or quarrelsome legalism. For there is nothing legalistic in this Torah faith. Without such hardening of God's will into harsh, self-serving absolutes, there is an urgent word here for us. There is among us in the U.S. church an anti-command notion that confuses Christian "grace alone" with the autonomy of Enlightenment modernity. The latter asserts that the self is the ultimate unit of meaning. Against such a mistaken conviction, the Torah psalms affirm that one is always connected and accountable, and cannot escape the demands of the holy God.

There is, in the judgment of this writer, an emergency need to show that God's commands are a reliable "lamp" for life, a gift of grace. The commands no doubt require endless interpretation and reapplication. Nonetheless, they stand over time, unflinching, setting boundaries against both self-indulgence and self-hate.

Romans 8:1–11

Certain portions of Rom. 8 are among the most familiar parts of Paul's letters. Verses 31–39 appear often in funeral liturgies, where they serve as an appropriate reminder of the faithfulness of God to God's people. Less happily, v. 28 has a tendency to appear when Christians attempt to make sense of tragic events. Three consecutive readings covering all of this chapter give the preacher an opportunity to show the way in which these passages serve a larger argument.

This first lection begins by recalling some major themes of the earlier sections of Romans. Accustomed to written texts, we forget that the earliest audience for this letter would have *heard* it read. Without the printing press, much less the techniques of photocopying, Chris-

tians could not rely on individual copies of texts. Paul had to provide ways in which listeners could follow what he was saying. Thus, the chapter begins by recalling God's action in Jesus Christ, an action that means that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God has done what human beings could not do because of their sinful state (see Rom. 3:21–31).

Even as Paul reviews what he has said earlier in the letter, he also introduces some new terms that will play a prominent role in this discussion. He talks about two kinds of people, those who "live according to the flesh" and those who "live according to the Spirit." The words "flesh" and "Spirit" may cause us to think that Paul is talking about two different parts of a human being—the flesh, the stuff that covers up your bones and the spirit, an unseen part that has to do with feeling and perceiving.

In this particular text, however, when he talks about living "according to the flesh" and living "according to the Spirit" Paul juxtaposes not two parts of the person but *two ways of living*. As in Rom. 6 and elsewhere, Paul describes the Christian situation by means of opposing powers or arenas of power. In Rom. 8:1–17 he opposes the Spirit of God to flesh. People either walk "according to the flesh" or "according to the Spirit." If their minds are "set . . . on the flesh," they are set on "death." Believers are not "in the flesh," but "in the Spirit." Notice that one cannot be in both arenas at the same time; neither can both Spirit and flesh influence a person. These are mutually exclusive categories.

Despite the first impression this flesh-Spirit opposition leaves, Paul is not simply invoking a moral dualism between the flesh as evil and the Spirit as good. The dualism reflected in this passage is cosmic or transcendent rather than moral, since the realm of the flesh refers to the realm ruled by sin, while the realm of the Spirit refers to the realm ruled by God. In this passage, Paul employs the terms "flesh" and "Spirit" in a metonymy, a figure of speech in which one feature of an entity serves to refer to the entire entity (for example, "counting heads" for counting persons, "the hand of God" for God). "Flesh" then refers to the rule of sin, in which human flesh, while in itself neutral rather than evil, is held hostage and is subject to corruption (along with the rest of creation). "Spirit," by contrast, refers to the realm ruled by God, in which the Spirit of God exerts its powerful role.

"Liv[ing] according to the flesh," then, does not necessarily mean living a life of gluttony, or indolence, or vanity. It means living in a way that is shaped by, controlled by, the values and standards of the world in rebellion against God. What Paul refers to here is not a list

of bad behaviors but what we would call a "mind-set"—a mind-set that daily makes its way in the world apart from its Creator. Paul contrasts this way of living with living "according to the Spirit." Paul's comments about this manner of living are a bit elusive. Here he simply says that living according to the Spirit is to have one's mind set on the Spirit; it is life and peace.

Having read this contrast between living in the Spirit and living in the flesh, the immediate response of many will be to look at ourselves and around at our neighbors: Who stands where? We are pleased to find ourselves living in the Spirit, although we may have some concerns about various of our friends and neighbors. And we being to congratulate ourselves on our good judgment. Or we may simply conclude that Paul wants us to choose: the proverbial fork in the road is before us. Which path will we select?

Reading v. 11 should correct this response: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." By a simple reassertion of the Easter event, Paul teaches us a most important lesson. First, the Spirit does not belong to human beings. The Spirit is always God's Spirit, never a human possession. Second, God *gives* the Spirit. If even Jesus did not raise himself from the dead but was raised by the Spirit of God, then human beings cannot earn the Spirit. We cannot choose or obtain the Spirit. The Spirit is always and forever a gift of the one sovereign and powerful God.

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

The Christian church has always been faced with the mystery of the gospel: why some people hear and eagerly respond and others hear and remain either indifferent or openly hostile. What explains the varying responses? Does God choose for some to be open and receptive and others to be deaf? Or are humans totally responsible for their own "hearing"? The mystery perplexed the disciples during the ministry of Jesus, and perplexed even more the early communities during the time of the writing of the Gospels.

Matthew's narrative reflects such a struggle, particularly in the section from 11:2 to 13:58. From the questions put to Jesus by an uncertain John (11:2–3) to the rejection of Jesus in his hometown synagogue (13:54–58), the text ponders the reality of divided reactions to the message of the rule of God. The Gospel reading for last Sunday (Matt. 11:16–19, 25–30) stressed that the knowledge of God is a gift

of grace, fitting for infants who make no pretense to wisdom. "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (11:27). The parable and its interpretation assigned for this Sunday, however, focus more pointedly on the audiences to whom the gospel is declared—their outright rejection, their short-lived acceptance, or their enthusiastic and fruitful response. The readings for the two Sundays, taken together, present the paradox of divine election and personal responsibility, the unrelieved tension between God's gracious gift of revelation and the need for human response.

Two dimensions of the text need to be underscored. First, the way in which the interpretation is linked to the parable stresses its impact particularly on the disciples. The audience for the parable itself is "the whole crowd" (13:2), and its closing words embrace a wide group: "Let anyone with ears listen!" (13:9). With 13:10 the immediate audience is narrowed. While the disciples don't ask for an explanation to this particular parable but for a rationale as to why Jesus speaks in parables at all, nevertheless what they get is an allegorical interpretation of the parable aimed pointedly at them. (Whether the interpretation of the parable historically comes from Jesus himself is not important for preaching.) Verse 18 can be paraphrased, "You disciples, listen to the parable of the sower." The "you" is emphatic.

The effect of directing the interpretation toward the disciples is to take the mystery of hearing the gospel out of the arena of speculation and to make it an existential issue. As hearers, the disciples are not allowed the luxury of armchair quarterbacking, of deliberating over someone else's positive or negative response as to who gets the credit or the blame. The text bluntly asks: How do *you* hear? What type of soil are *you*? Does your hearing lead to understanding? Those included within the circle of followers are face-to-face with their own quality of hearing. There is no place for smugness. Rather than judging the reactions of others, the disciples are forced to examine their own responsiveness to the gospel and whether or not they have exhibited the staying power that eventuates in a fruitful harvest.

The second element of the text that sticks out is the extraordinary proportions of the harvest. The three types of bad soil are paralleled by three levels of prosperity. Historians suggest that a seven-to-tenfold harvest would have been considered average. Here the talk is of a thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and even hundredfold harvest.

While the disciples may have to ask themselves questions about their own hearing of the gospel, there is nevertheless assurance about the ultimate outcome of the sowing of the word. The final scene is a picture not of the birds' snatching away the seed sown on

the path, nor of the rootless plants on the rocky ground wilting in the blistering heat, nor of the spindly stalks crowded out by the weeds, but of a full and bountiful harvest. To the original disciples, who were so few among so many, and Matthew's community, dwarfed by its surroundings, the final scene engenders great confidence in God's purposes. Though the numbers are small, the opposition painful, and the rejections many, the remarkable size of the harvest is a reminder of God's blessing, the assurance of a grand and glorious conclusion.