PROPER 12

Ordinary Time 17

Sunday between
July 24 and 30 inclusive

One of the major tasks of preaching is the discovery of speech that renders the presence of the biblical God available, confronting, and nurturing to a contemporary congregation. It is not just how one talks *about* God, but how one talks so that the speech of God is heard, so that God's voice speaks afresh, so that people encounter the reality of the God of Jacob and of Jesus. God's speaking and human hearing reorient the present and open up for the people of God a new and hopeful future. Of course, talking about God and talking in such a way that God's speech is heard are not unrelated. Our texts for this Sunday make that abundantly clear. They bring together the remembrance of God past with the reality of God present.

At first glance the story in Gen. 29 of how Jacob won Rachel would seem to have little to do with God. Jacob, who has so cleverly duped his older brother, Esau, out of what was rightfully his, is the object of a similar ruse, for he awakens to discover that he has married not the beloved Rachel, but the less desired Leah. The trickster has been tricked, and readers of this story—both ancient and modern—have gained wonderful entertainment over Jacob's predicament. But Jacob is no fool. Through a combination of patience and perseverance he ultimately wins Rachel, thus setting the stage for all that is to follow in the story of Abraham's family. Yet the insightful reader senses that the real reason Jacob has prevailed is because God has chosen him.

Psalm 105 addresses a forgetful community, which has lost touch with the God of the exodus. Israel is invited to seek its God by remembering the wonderful works God has done and by declaring those works among the people. Remembering turns out to be a powerful experience when it focuses on both God's actions and God's judgments. Recalling that God has not forgotten the covenant made with Israel enables Israel to remember the promise of the land given

as its inheritance. The present and the future are reenvisioned in light of the recollection of the authorized past.

Romans 8 is also a reminder of God's way ("We know . . . ," 8:28), of God's movements from knowledge to action, from saving grace to promised glory. Weakness is not the final description of the human condition, because the God who once acted still acts. Through the Spirit, God hears the prayers of the saints, just as the cries of the Israelites were heard in Egypt.

The scribe of Matthew's short parable (Matt. 13:52), who is being schooled for God's future reign, brings out of the storehouse both what is new and what is old. There is no true future without a remembrance of the past. The rehearsal of God's promised reign enables the community to understand the decisively new action of God in Jesus, the confirmation of the promise, and the claim of the future.

Genesis 29:15–28

The trickster tricked! Such a heading might be placed over this bitter- (for Jacob) sweet (for the reader) narrative.

Jacob is in Haran, in part at least because he has fled the wrath of his elder twin, Esau, from whom he has skillfully extracted his birthright and whose blessing he had tricked from his father, Isaac. These two hereditary benefits seem to have been foreign to ancient Israelite society generally, and may have been borrowed from the Hurrians who inhabited the region around Haran. In any event, the manner in which Jacob takes advantage of Esau's vulnerability to coax from him the birthright (Gen. 25:29–34) and then takes advantage of their father's infirmity to steal the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau (27:1–40)—these events have resulted in a deep rupture between the brothers. Because his life is in danger, Jacob flees from Esau and heads for the homeland of Uncle Laban and other relatives (27:41–45).

Yet Jacob's journey to Haran is also occasioned, in part, by Rebekah's wish that her favorite Jacob should marry "from the family" and not from among the local women, a sentiment that reminds the reader of a similar attitude on the part of Abraham (Gen. 24:3–4; see Proper 9).

Once Jacob has arrived at Laban's home, it may not have taken long for him to fall in love with Rachel. The text is not specific about that (but note 29:9–11), but it did take a long time for him to claim Rachel as his wife. Seven years is the period of indenture that Jacob

promises to serve his uncle for the prize, and his ability to claim Rachel at all is a result of their kinship (29:15). Not just any bedouin showing up at the oasis could hope to labor for the sheik's daughter.

The characterization of Leah's eyes (v. 17) is uncertain. The adjective (*rakôth*) may mean "tender," as in the case of the flesh of the calf Abraham prepared for his guests (Gen. 18:7), or it may signify "incompetent," as in David's rhetorical question concerning himself in 2 Sam. 3:39. Thus, while NRSV reads that Leah's eyes were "lovely," other translations opt for "dull-eyed" (REB) or "weak" (RSV). Probably some negative quality is intended, since the contrast is with the beloved Rachel, who was "graceful and beautiful."

Laban's statement in v. 19 is self-serving, in that the reason the deal is "better" is not because of some superior quality in Jacob, but because of the fact that no other young man would be foolish enough to serve so long (fourteen years, as it turned out) in order to gain a wife, no matter how beautiful. There were quicker methods in the ancient world of claiming the girl of one's dreams! Perhaps a large part of the reason Jacob did not object to the unconscionable demands placed on him was that he was in no hurry to return home to angry Esau. That sober reality, in addition to "the love he had for [Rachel]" (v. 20) helped to shorten the days.

How delicious Laban's joke must have seemed to the older man! A veiled bride in the dark of night, a shared bed, and—with the coming of daybreak—surprise! Surprise, indeed! It was not Rachel at all whose warm embraces had transported Jacob all the night long, but unloved Leah! The father had managed a marriage for the daughter who could boast no suitor. (The reader can only speculate on Leah's mood. Did she enjoy this wonderful joke also? If this subterfuge had failed, would she have lost her only chance ever to claim a husband? But it didn't fail. The trap was sprung—on Jacob!)

When Jacob complains of his deception, Laban's excuse is lame. "Oh, yes," he says in effect, "I neglected to tell you. There is this custom among us: elder daughters first! After your weeklong honeymoon, begin another seven-year indenture and, on its completion, Rachel will be yours."

If Jacob has any recourse (contest at arms, appeal to the tribal elders, or whatever), he does not pursue it. He simply complies, and only after working another seven years is he able to lead Rachel under the bridal canopy. (The "week" of wedding festivities mentioned in v. 27 appears to have been confused in v. 28 with the "week" of years for which Jacob must work. The final sentence in v. 30 makes it clear that Jacob worked an additional seven years for Rachel.)

And thus the one who had created so much anger and mistrust at home by his cunning and deception is himself deceived. Yet in the end he prevails because his persistence is as great as his perfidy. Subtly woven in as a subtext to this story is the crucial realization that Jacob also prevails because God has chosen him (Gen. 28:13–15).

Psalm 105:1–11, 45b

Psalm 105 is an act of passionate remembering. The remembering, however, is not an act of nostalgia, but a way of defining the present in a specific way, and inviting the community to a future that is given only by this remembered God. Israel's faith is an endless process of making the past contemporary as an angle from which a very different future is possible.

The psalm begins in an exuberant summons to thank and praise (vs. 1–6). These verses do not develop or advance an argument, but simply repeat and reiterate in various ways the central act of Israel's life, praise and gratitude. The psalm is clearly an antidote to a community infected with amnesia, which cannot remember anything important. Such an act of exuberant remembrance is crucial in a community like the biblical community of faith (synagogue and church), which suffers from systemic amnesia, which knows little of its past, and which lacks the patience, language, and energy to receive and appropriate the past. A community that is indifferent to and illiterate about its past gifts and miracles will surely misunderstand, misread, and misconstrue the present. This psalm is at the same time a battle for a concrete past and an advocacy for a different present. The present, however, is not available without a reappropriation of this past.

The subject of this past now recovered and recited is not us in our power and self-sufficiency. The subject is Yahweh, who was so central and prevalent in the past, but who now appears to be irrelevant. Israel has always known that when Yahweh's name and deeds are forgotten we will be seduced into imagined self-sufficiency, which will end in destruction (Deut. 8:11–20). In the lyrical verses of this psalm, the summons to remember is at the same time the very act of remembering. The act of remembrance is constituted in a gesture of praise, which reshapes the past as a gift from Yahweh. Thus the psalmist speaks of "deeds . . . works . . . wonderful works . . . miracles . . . judgments."

The psalm now becomes specific (vs. 7–10). The thesis is stated:

Yahweh is our God (v. 7). That is who God is, the one who has done miracles. That is who we are, partners with God in covenant, recipients of God's goodness. God's life and our life are inalienably linked. Moreover, our present-tense life with God is rooted in God's uttered "judgments" (vs. 5, 7a), which persist everywhere. The "judgments" are God's self-announcements, which have ordained in our present life purposes, resolves, and intentions other than our own that operate with enormous authority. Our life is shaped and bound by God's uttered resolves, of which we are the bonded recipients.

Again the recital becomes more specific. God has made covenant, an abiding, persistent, definitional relation, which is the overriding reality of our life (vs. 8–9). A larger purpose is at work on our behalf. We are bound in a covenant not devised by us, a promise of fidelity, a promise of care and governance, an oath to fend off every seductive fickleness. The psalm invites the community to reread its present existence through categories derived from this precious, powerful, authorized past.

The poet names the futures that emerge from the old promise: "land . . . portion . . . inheritance" (v. 11). The memories of Genesis push out beyond our mothers and fathers, beyond wilderness to land, beyond exile to homecoming, beyond death to life, beyond marginality to well-being. The promise of God intends that none shall live as displaced persons, none shall live without life supports and social guarantees, none shall live without belonging in full membership. Moses invokes that powerful promise, names the ancestors, and envisions the land (Ex. 3:15, 17). Moreover, the Gospel reading is about the "kingdom of heaven," about the Promised Land of well-being which exists only in God's resolve and in the evangelical imagination of the church. Life pushes toward well-being intended by God. Israel remembers in order to hope. Israel praises in order to imagine. In this doxological recital, Israel learns that the truth of its life consists not in security and achievement and power, but in miracles remembered, in promises trusted, and in futures given beyond our own invention. Israel rereads its past and its future, and is liberated for a different present tense.

Romans 8:26–39

The conclusion of Rom. 8 begins with an astonishing assertion of weakness and concludes with an even more astonishing claim about the future. Far from having escaped the world, believers do not even know how to pray as they should. The language of v. 26 leaves it unclear exactly what Paul means by "We do not know how to pray as we ought." Although often taken as a reference to the subjective stance of those who pray (for example, who do not know what words to use or how to express their petitions), little elsewhere in early Christian writings indicates a feeling of inadequacy in prayer. Paul may have in mind a more theological weakness in Christian prayer; that is, even believers do not know what the will of God is that they should be seeking in their prayer.

Verse 27 reinforces this reading of the passage, recalling that God knows what is in the mind of the Spirit and that the Spirit intercedes according to God's will. Despite the weakness of humankind and its sense of isolation from God and longing for God, what Paul conveys here is a deep interconnectedness between God, God's Spirit, and God's creatures.

In vs. 28–30 Paul turns from this direct consideration of the suffering, longing, and weakness of humanity to explicit and powerful words of comfort. The first statement of comfort has often emerged from interpreters' hands as a word of law or a litmus test of faith: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." However, to say that everything works together for good means, *in this context*, that the longing of creation, the activity of the Spirit, even humanity's inarticulate cries do not exist apart from God's will. God is able to use even those things which reflect the depth of human weakness and turn them for the good.

The lines that follow reinforce this seemingly outrageous claim: God foreknew, God predestined, God called, God justified, God glorified (vs. 29–30). The point here is not to figure out who belongs within the circle of the justified and who does not. As is generally the case in Romans, Paul has in view the action of God and only very subordinately its implications about human standing. The insistence here, then, is not that some people are predestined to be among God's family and others are not. Instead, Paul insists that *God* is the one who designs, desires, and brings about the good. Everything that God has put in place has been for the salvation of humankind. No human act can secure this salvation, and no human act can jeopardize this salvation. It belongs to God alone.

The opening question in the third section of the lection signals that what follows is to be important (cf., for example, 3:9; 4:1; 6:1). The words that immediately follow this question tip Paul's hand by

revealing what the paragraph itself will say: "If God is for us . . . ." For Paul, the "if" does not indicate that he has a question about God's allegiance. Instead, "if" signals the presupposition from which other questions are to be answered. God *is* on humanity's side.

The dominant question throughout the passage is, "Who?" First it appears in the form of "Who is against us?" If God has already given up his only Son on behalf of God's people, will God not also give them everything else? This form of logic strikes modern ears as strange, since God might conclude that the gift of the Son was sufficient and more. Paul is using a method of reasoning that was well established in his day, in which it was regarded as logical to reason from something greater to something lesser.

The second "who" question comes in v. 33: "Who will bring any charge against God's elect?" and is followed immediately by a restatement: "It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" The language recalls that of a courtroom, and Paul pauses to suggest one who might be imagined as prosecutor: Jesus Christ. But since Jesus died and was raised and, indeed, intercedes for God's people, Jesus will certainly not prosecute God's own.

The third "who" question comes in v. 35: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" This question moves away from the courtroom scene of vs. 33–34, and so it may seem formally different from the ones that have preceded. In a sense, however, this question not only restates the preceding questions, but pulls them together. This indeed is the underlying question: Who or what can effect a separation between God and humankind?

Having arrived at the heart of the matter, Paul offers a sustained and emphatic response. First, he asks yet another question about what can separate humankind from God, and then he provides a list of threatening events or experiences that have in common the fact that human beings themselves can and do bring them about. Second, Paul quotes a psalm to interpret these experiences as happening for the sake of Christ. Finally, not content to let the audience deduce his answer from the questions he has asked, Paul asserts emphatically: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Now the horizon expands dramatically. Not only are human actions unable to bring about separation from the love of Christ, but even those powers which go beyond the merely human (death itself, angels, powers that rule this world) cannot separate humanity from Christ's love.

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Though the Gospel reading is composed of five separate units of material found in the latter half of the parable chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the units together provide an occasion for reflecting on dimensions of discipleship—its prospects, its discovery, its urgency, and its discipline. The vividness of the imagery and the contrast between this-worldly language and otherworldly language have immense evocative power, perhaps suggesting that the sermon on the passage should be one that allows the images the freedom to function, to stimulate the imagination of modern disciples in their efforts to be faithful.

1. The parable of the mustard seed (13:31–33) in some ways images the primary theme of the entire chapter. It offers a word of encouragement to those who puzzle about their investment in the Christian mission. The reign of God may seem like sheer weakness, no more than an insignificant mustard seed. But take heart. The tiny mustard seed ultimately produces a huge shrub, and God's reign is like that. Don't be deceived by its modest beginnings. Its final consummation will be great.

2. The parables of the treasure in the field (13:44) and the pearl of great value (vs. 45–46) belong together. They share a common pattern, in that when the treasure or the pearl is found, the discoverer sells all he has and buys it. One thinks of the demands of discipleship, the costliness of life under the rule of God, the theme usually developed from the text. And yet the two parables are also different, and in their differences other ideas are sparked.

The protagonist in the first parable is presumably a worker, who perhaps in plowing the field comes across the valuable treasure. His discovery is an unexpected surprise. He is overcome by his good fortune and joyfully goes about selling what he has to purchase the field in order to secure the treasure against any other claimant.

The protagonist of the second parable, however, is a pearl merchant, likely a person of means, who sets out on a quest to locate the "one pearl of great value." His discovery is not a totally unexpected event. It is the result of persistent searching. But he, like the first man, liquidates all his assets to buy the sought-after gem.

The experience of discovery differs for each of the two characters, the result of entirely different backgrounds and circumstances. In both cases, however, the object found becomes the overriding concern, the concern that crowds out all other concerns. Neither

protagonist considers the possibility of passing up the chance to purchase the field or the pearl. The discovery takes precedence over prudence or caution. Living under the reign of God entails discoveries like these, which reshape priorities and result in single-minded devotion.

3. The parable of the net (13:47–50) presents a dramatic contrast to the previous parables, because an interpretation is attached that gives it an apocalyptic reading. The dragnet collects all sorts of fish, both edible and nonedible. When the net is dragged to shore, fishermen put the good fish into baskets and throw out the bad fish. "So it will be at the end of the age." Evil people and righteous people in the world will be separated, and the evil will be punished. The parable with its interpretation recalls the earlier parable of the wheat and the weeds and its explanation (13:24–30, 36–43).

This parabolic depiction of the final judgment adds a dimension to the understanding of discipleship. The discovery of treasures and pearls is not a trivial pursuit; it carries ultimate significance. Selling all one has and buying the desired objects are not just admirable options; they have eternal consequences. Mention of the final judgment reminds the hearers and readers of the parables that discipleship is not a game of "let's pretend"; it is a matter of life and death.

4. The section of Matt. 13 relating the parables comes to a close with Jesus' question to the disciples, "Have you understood all this?" How are we to take their bold answer, "Yes"? Is this an arrogant statement later to be exposed when their ignorance comes to the fore? Is it an honest misunderstanding on their part to claim that they understand? Or do they really understand? The narrator leaves us dangling, since Jesus passes no verdict one way or another on their answer. Hereafter in the story, they both understand and misunderstand.

What readers do learn is that understanding is critical—not so much intellectual perceptiveness, but an understanding of the heart (13:15; Isa. 6:9–10). The scribe who has undergone training for the kingdom of heaven is a lively image. It conjures up the specter of disciplined learning, of committed engagement to prepare for life under the divine rule. The disciplined learning involves things both old and new. There is the old story to be rehearsed, of God's promise to establish a reign of peace and justice in the world and of God's working in the history of an ancient people to bring about that reign. There is also the new fact—Jesus' entry into the story, confirming the promise and demonstrating, albeit in a hidden way, the nature of God's reign. In the disciple's training the two belong together.

PROPER 13

Ordinary Time 18

Sunday between July 31 and August 6 inclusive

On any given Sunday in any given congregation are heav[illegible] people. One may be the person whose business has turned[illegible] who is wondering what the future holds. His failure lea[illegible] wrenching feelings of worthlessness. And there is the m[illegible] woman with gaping wounds of grief, newly facing life[illegible] spouse, scared to death of how she will cope. And the s[illegible]ginalized may be there, perplexed and angry because obsta[illegible] constantly put in their way. Whatever their circumstances, these people are among the many asking, "Does God care? Can God do anything about my situation?" They may not speak so clearly as the psalmist, but his words are in fact their words: "Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry" (Ps. 17:1).

Of course the preacher can't offer these burdened people immediate and particular assurance, even from God. There is no divine guarantee that the business will turn around for the troubled businessperson, or that the middle-aged woman will not ache in her loneliness, or that the marginalized persons will suddenly find the barriers removed. But the texts assigned for this Sunday in one way or another do take seriously both the anguish and distortions of human life and the divine concern for human needs. The God of the Bible is a God who cares and whose history with the community of faith is a long story of suffering love and caring provision.

The narrative of Jacob's wrestling with the "man" at the Jabbok in Gen. 32 is one of the Bible's archetypical stories of struggle. At one level, this is a story of the human struggle with God, but at another level it is a story of a human being's struggle with himself. Yet what emerges from the tale—in a most cryptic and imperfectly understood manner—is the reality that, even in the midst of our struggles with God and with self, the most enduring word is a word of God's grace. In the end the "man" blesses Jacob and bestows on him a new name.

Romans 9 also deals with suffering, in this case that of Paul over