

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 heavyhearted people. One may be the person whose business has turned sour and who is wondering what the future holds. His failure leaves behind wrenching feelings of worthlessness. And there is the middle-aged woman with gaping wounds of grief, newly facing life without a spouse, scared to death of how she will cope. And the socially marginalized may be there, perplexed and angry because obstacles are 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 archetypal 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

the failure of Israel to receive God's Messiah, the Christ. It is clear that this anguish is very personal, for it involves the dilemma of how God's own people could reject God's Messiah without rendering invalid the Word of God. Yet not even so difficult a dilemma can obscure the fundamental mercy of God, and it is on that emphatic note that the lection ends.

The story of the feeding of the multitudes in Matt. 14 is also a reminder that God's mercy is real. Obedient disciples become agents through whom God's provisions are served to hungry people. In the unusual language of the text readers also discern overtones of the Sacrament, where the presence of Christ is made available for God's people.

The readings provide dramatic instances to declare that God does care and that God never abandons people of faith.

Genesis 32:22-31

These verses, which constitute the last of three consecutive lections having to do with Jacob/Israel, form one of the more celebrated stories from Genesis. Part of the fascination with this text is that it purports to explain the name Israel in terms of the verb *sārāh*, meaning "to strive" (but cf. Gen. 35:9-15, where no such explanation is given), while somewhat incidentally it also provides a rationale for the name of a place (v. 30) and (in the verse that follows, v. 32) for a certain dietetic practice.

But another part of the power of the text lies in its unanswered questions. Who is the "man" with whom Jacob struggles? Why will he not tell Jacob his name? From what source does he derive his authority to bless Jacob and to change Jacob's name? And why does the new name of the schemer Jacob, and not that of the less controversial Abraham or Isaac, become the name of the special family of God?

Even the causes of the struggle between Jacob and the "man" are unclear. Is Jacob the aggressor, having violated the domain of some river genie? Or is the "man" to be understood as some bedouin thief, a desert criminal who violates the ancient laws of hospitality by preying in the darkness on unsuspecting travelers and who fears above all the revealing light of day? In either event, Jacob and his adversary are an equal match, and the "man" succeeds in disentangling himself from the fray only at the cost of conferring a blessing on Jacob. Yet Jacob, for all his strength and skill at self-defense, is not able to wrest from the "man" his name, the key to his identity and an important source of power over him. ♦

In the midst of the array of unanswered questions, at least two things stand clear. The first is that Jacob's new name, Israel, reveals his character: he is a fighter. The NRSV marginal reading of v. 28 is perhaps the best rendering of the Hebrew text: "You have striven with divine and human beings, and have prevailed." Or to paraphrase, "You, Jacob, have slugged it out with nature and with your neighbor, and you have succeeded at every turn. And so your new name will reflect your character: Scrapper-with-God." When one remembers the earlier stories of how the second-born Jacob overcomes the disadvantage of his birth by outwitting his elder brother and his father, it becomes apparent how appropriate the new name is. And when one also recalls how the vulnerable son-in-law, although temporarily duped by the rich father of the bride, ultimately succeeds in winning the favorite daughter and the favorite livestock alike, the impression is strengthened.

Another reality is that, whoever the "man" may have been (perhaps in some precanonical version of the story), in the text we have received there is no doubt in Jacob's mind that he is *'ēlōhīm*, either God or a representative of God. A large part of the appeal of this passage has to do with the manner in which this insight is achieved by Jacob, who seems ignorant of the "man's" character until v. 30. One possibility is that the being's superior strength proved his superhuman nature. But Jacob is elsewhere frightfully aware of his own limited strength (32:7) and, what is more, the power of the "man" is simply not that overwhelming. Another possibility is that Jacob recognized the divine character of his opponent in the authority with which the "man" blessed him. But Isaac also blessed Jacob (27:27-29), and in far more lucrative terms than did the "man."

Although the text is not explicit in the matter, Jacob seems to understand the "man" to be *'ēlōhīm* by virtue of the new name the "man" confers. Who else but God would have understood so fundamentally the mind and heart of Jacob as to call him Israel? Who else but God would fathom the intricacies of Jacob's being and boldly designate him Scrapper-with-God? And who else but God would be so audacious as to bestow a blessing on Scrapper-with-God, a blessing that implied a special and continuing relationship between deity and human individual (cf. 35:11)? Thus an ultimate irony: being confronted with the mirror that God held before beleaguered Jacob, a mirror that reflected a flawed and sinful Jacob, Jacob saw also Peniel, the face of God.

Of great importance, then, is the connection that the text draws between our understanding of ourselves as we truly are and our recognition of God as God truly is. There is a great deal in the bibli-

cal tradition that draws attention to the movement from an awareness of God's good character to a constructive awareness of our own sinful character. Isaiah 6:1-8, where the prophet is impressed, first, with God's holiness and, subsequently, with his own flawed morality, is a classic case in point. But the present text seems to move in a somewhat different direction. Jacob could not have helped but understand his own conniving ways. The less-than-amicable leave-taking from Laban (31:1-17) and his fear of encountering Esau (32:3-8) could not entirely be put down to persecution by others. And so what he learns in the struggle at the Jabbok is not that he is a schemer, but that God knows who he is and accepts him anyway. The "miracle" of the Jabbok is in reality the good news, the gospel, that God engages us as we are and, having named our name, preserves us (v. 30) in order to transform us.

Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Israel's faith permits it to voice all its reality directly to God. In Psalm 17, the speaker cries out to God in the midst of danger. The very act of crying out is itself an act of enormous trust and confidence in God. The speaker is unjustly accused, and seeks acquittal from God.

The speaker is a just, righteous, obedient, good person who states his innocence (vs. 1-5). The petition is not frivolous, but just. That is, the speaker has a legitimate claim on God. The speaker does not ask for mercy or a free gift of grace. Rather the speaker has upheld his side of the covenant with God, and now warrants a good hearing from God.

The statement of innocence includes "lips free of deceit" (v. 1). This speaker has not lied or borne false witness or committed slander. The speaker is willing to be tested and closely examined, for there will be no evidence of wickedness (v. 3). The speaker has avoided the ways of violence, either by the way he talks (v. 4), or by the way he walks (v. 5).

It is remarkable that this entire claim of innocence has to do with lips and words. The speaker knows that among the powerful, speech is the most powerful and dangerous tool, for speech can create a false reality through propaganda, ideology, and dishonest policy, which can distort social reality. This speaker has done none of that (cf. Isa. 5:20 for a contrast). The voice of this psalm has named things by their right names, and has lived in honest recognition of social reality as it in fact is.

For all his discipline and innocence, however, the speaker is nonetheless in a situation of tribulation, perhaps is unjustly accused of having skewed social reality. The prayer appeals to juridical metaphors. Thus "just cause . . . vindication . . . try." He has his rights before God and expects them to be honored. Conversely, God has obligations to honor. Thus the prayer is offered in boldness.

The speaker asks for vindication, the right, that is, acquittal (v. 2). We now learn what acquittal would look like (vs. 6-7). God is expected to hear and answer. The speech proceeds as though God is the presiding officer of a court. The petition is only that the testimony of the speaker should be taken seriously, for if taken seriously, there is no doubt that the verdict will be acquittal.

On the basis of hearing and answering, God will exhibit steadfast love (*hesed*) (v. 7). In this word (*hesed*) we come to the theological center of the psalm. The petitioner asks only that God would show appropriate covenantal fidelity. We now see why the psalmist has used so much energy stating his own innocence and fidelity. It is his fidelity to covenant that gains the right to insist on God's fidelity in response. Everything depends on God's *hesed*, and the mobilization of God's *hesed* depends on the *hesed* and passionate urging of the petitioner. Notice that this model of prayer is quite at variance from our usual notions of deference and submissiveness. This is not the voice of an empty-handed suppliant, but of one who has a place to stand vis-à-vis God, who insists on some rights in the presence of God. The psalm intends to put God on the spot, to see if God will intrude, that is, extend *hesed* to such a needy, passionate, deserving subject.

Predictably, the lectionary reading skips over the hard critique of the adversary and the passionate hope for the downfall of the adversary (vs. 13-14). To that extent, the reading reneges on the mutuality of fidelity on which the prayer is promised. The absence of these verses permits the psalm to be read as empty-handed submissiveness, which it manifestly is not.

In the end, the psalmist anticipates full entry into the promise and presence of God (v. 15). Astonishingly, the psalm anticipates "beholding your likeness," that is, actually seeing God. The language is usually taken to be either metaphorical or referring to cultic communion. Whatever its words may suggest, the psalmist anticipates an occasion of full, open communion in which the cause of trouble is overcome and God is fully, freely available. God's "righteousness" (v. 15) means the happy correction of all injustice. The petitioner speaks his prayer with passion and urgency, but not in despair. The prayer is an act of convinced hope, utterly sure of God's power and God's responsiveness to human fidelity. All that remains for the

speaker is to mobilize God to act in *hesed*; then the world will become an area for full covenantal communion.

Romans 9:1–5

Standing at the outset of Rom. 9–11, in which Paul discusses the relationship between Israel's vocation and Israel's rejection of the messiahship of Jesus, this passage must be considered in its larger context. Paul, having just concluded an exalted affirmation of God's power to overcome anything that threatens God's people (8:31–39), here takes up a threat that is specific and grave. The vast majority of Jews do not understand that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, and Paul, a Jew proud of his heritage, experiences in that contradiction both existential grief and a severe theological problem.

What comes to expression most clearly in 9:1–5 is the personal anguish this situation causes for Paul. With three separate affirmations ("I am speaking the truth in Christ," "I am not lying," "my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit"), he paves the way for the serious topic at hand. Verse 2 speaks of the "great sorrow and unceasing anguish," still without revealing what causes this pain. Only in v. 3 does the topic itself emerge—"for the sake of my own people"—and here with an assertion of frightening magnitude. For the sake of these people, Paul could wish himself to be "accursed and cut off from Christ." In order to effect the salvation of Israel, Paul would take on himself the anathema of Christ!

What drives the discussion that follows in chapters 9–11 is not only this personal grief. Already in 9:6, Paul moves from his own private anguish to the profound theological question: Has God's word failed? Does the fact that most of Israel rejects the messiahship of Jesus mean that God has failed? Does it mean that God has rejected God's own people? Throughout this section of the letter, Paul will struggle to hold together two seemingly contradictory assertions. He will insist *both* that Israel's calling is irrevocable *and* that God's word has not failed. Israel's calling remains intact, because God is faithful and has perennially elected God's own chosen from within Israel. God's word has not failed, because the temporary exclusion of Israel takes place within God's larger plan for the salvation of all human beings.

In this larger context, Rom. 9:1–5 serves primarily to introduce the topic at hand. Verses 4–5, however, contain some specific assertions to which Christians need to pay close attention. Here Paul itemizes those

things which belong to Israel: "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever." Three observations need to be kept in mind regarding this list. First, Paul at least implicitly, if not explicitly, designates these characteristics of Israel as *gifts* of God. The phrase, "God blessed forever," at the culmination of the list, along with the overall context, confirms that God has freely granted Israel these privileges. Among them, notice, is the law, which Paul explicitly terms a gift. Contrary to much in Christian, especially Protestant, interpretation, the law is not a burden, but first of all a gift.

Second, these gifts continue to belong to Israel. The NRSV puts this list in the present tense ("They *are* Israelites, and to them *belong* . . .," emphases added). The Greek list contains no verbs, but the implication of the Greek is, nevertheless, that the gifts are ongoing in nature. Indeed, if that were not the case, then both Paul's grief and the tortured logic of Rom. 9–11 would be unnecessary. God's gifts to Israel, primarily indications of God's relationship to Israel, continue. This is not, of course, simply an item of historical interest, but a crucial theological point, since Christian history frequently reflects the attempt to claim Israel's gifts for the church. Supersessionism, however, flounders on the ongoing nature of God's relationship with Israel. The predominantly Gentile church does not replace Israel or strip Israel of its favor with God.

Third, the list of Israel's gifts culminates with the gift of the Messiah. The Messiah comes from the house of Israel. That simple historical assertion, acknowledging that Jesus is born as a Jew, secures the particularity of the Christian gospel. In that gospel, God becomes incarnate in the particular form of a Jewish male. Attempts to separate Christ from that history by claiming, for example, that Jesus' Jewishness is merely accidental or that Jesus' Jewishness no longer matters following the resurrection, amount to attempts to separate Jesus from history. They are a kind of Docetism, seeking to separate the risen Lord from the history of Israel and the life of humankind. This passage, as much else in the New Testament, affirms the connection between the Messiah and the people of Israel. Given the fact that Paul generally shows little interest in the events of Jesus' life, the assertion of this connection with Israel is significant indeed.

Preaching any part of Rom. 9–11 proves difficult because of the historical situation that stands behind it, the complexity of Paul's argument, and the tragic history of Christian-Jewish relations since the first century. Nevertheless, these chapters warrant frequent reflec-

tion, not least because of their reminder of the ongoing nature of God's faithfulness.

Matthew 14:13–21

We have learned in recent years that there are various ways of approaching a text, various avenues of investigation, various questions to be asked. Familiar passages often yield fresh meanings when more than one line of approach is followed. So it is with Matthew's story of the feeding of the five thousand.

First, consider the context. The story occurs in the narrative immediately following the account of the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1–12), an incident that is a flashback to an earlier time in order to explain why Herod (actually Herod Antipas, son of King Herod) is anxious about Jesus. He thinks Jesus may be John risen from the dead, and his anxiety leads Jesus to attempt a withdrawal to a "deserted place."

The context then confronts us with two contrasting meals—Herod's birthday party and Jesus' feeding of the crowds. In the former story, amid a context of plenty, we encounter the gruesome details of Herodias's scheming. The account becomes a tale of rancor and revenge, even to the point that Herod himself grieves when he awakes to the diabolical web in which he is caught. A prophet of God is murdered by a threatened authority. In the second story, amid a situation of need, we see Jesus moved by great compassion, curing the sick and providing a bountiful meal for the crowds. Though apparently under threat himself and unable to make a successful withdrawal (14:13), he becomes the host for a hungry multitude. The compassion of the one meal stands in sharp contrast to the vindictiveness of the other.

Second, consider within the text itself the dynamics between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus' compassion for the crowds rubs off on the disciples. They become concerned about the lateness of the hour and the lack of available food for the multitudes. When they suggest that Jesus send them to the surrounding villages to purchase supplies, he clearly has other plans. His instructions are decisive: "They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat" (emphasis added); "Bring them here to me." (The omission of the boy from the story [cf. John 6:9] leads to a more concentrated focus on the relationship between Jesus and the disciples.) The resources the disciples can muster are meager, but Jesus helps them to discover that such resources are sufficient. In his hands they become more than enough.

The story provides a description of the miraculous power of Jesus in the face of a difficult situation, but integral to the exercise of power is the role of the disciples. They are indispensable—from the diagnosis of the need to the gathering up of the leftovers. They act on the orders of Jesus, orders that seem preposterous and beyond credulity. And yet the crispness of their response and their unquestioning obedience make them model figures. They here symbolize what it means to participate in the compassionate ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, the disciples learn about the divine concern for the hungry precisely by doing what they are told. They are not given any prior briefing about how it will all work out. Rather, in the act of carrying out Jesus' directions, they discover one whose compassion goes beyond their wildest dreams.

Third, consider the broader context. A number of details in the story itself lead us to recognize in the feeding a eucharistic meaning. Strikingly, it is only the loaves (and not the fish) that are specifically given to the disciples for distribution (14:19). The orderly arrangement of the people, the prayer of invocation and the blessing, the liturgical act of breaking the bread, the immediate parallel to the death of John the Baptist—all are unmistakable clues that point to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The initial readers of the Gospel who already gather regularly for sacramental observances are bound to draw connections between the feeding in Galilee and the feeding in the upper room in Jerusalem.

But what can we learn by acknowledging the connections between the accounts of the two events? For one thing, Jesus here is clearly the compassionate provider, who not only gives a morsel of bread and a sip of wine, but heals sicknesses and feeds the body. His ministry is physical as well as spiritual. At Communion, we are reminded that Jesus takes seriously all the dimensions of human brokenness and need. For another thing, this feeding, as well as the last supper, occurs in the face of fierce opposition. As the psalmist put it, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Ps. 23:5). The eucharistic meal has a special significance for those whose faithfulness has placed them in a precarious position. Finally, the disciples obviously are under the mandate to feed the hungry. To be sure, they are not left alone to perform the miracle, but they function as essential agents to carry out Jesus' ministry to the multitudes.