

6th Sunday after Pentecost, yr. a, 7/12/2020
Genesis 25: 19-34; Romans 8: 1-3; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23
Let Anyone with Ears, Listen! – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 8:1) Do we really know deep in our hearts in our lives, in our very being that God now, not in some vaguely imagined future, but now, does not condemn us? I think deep down in some part of ourselves we often believe – feel – that we somehow have to earn or deserve or measure up to God’s blessing, God’s forgiveness, God’s love. God loves us, God forgives us if ... if we try harder, if we do better, if we behave better, if we are “perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48), forgetting that even God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

In our reading from Genesis we hear how God finally starts to make good on God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah to make of their descendants a great nation and that by their descendants all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. After 20 years of not being able to conceive, Rebekah, Isaac’s wife, finally is pregnant. Not only that, she’s going to give birth to twins. But, she knows that something strange is going on, because she can feel the twins struggling together in her womb. So she asks God about it. And the Lord answers, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; ... the elder shall serve the younger.” Now that seems to be a weird way to fulfill a

promise. Why does God seem to set one brother against another, even in their mother's womb?

And that's not all. Later Jacob tricks his brother Esau out of his birthright, his inheritance, by exploiting Esau's hunger – buying Esau's birthright for a meal. And even later, we will read how Jacob robs Esau of his father's blessing by tricking Isaac into thinking that he, Jacob, is Esau. Why would God reward Jacob? Why would God fulfill God's promise, for such sneakiness and deception?

“There is therefore now no condemnation ...” (Roman 8:1)

In our gospel reading from Matthew we hear Jesus teaching great crowds with parables – stories. He tells a story of a farmer who went out to sow seeds and he throws the seed all over the place so the seed falls on the hard path where the birds eat it, on the rocky ground where the seed grows but withers for lack of roots, among the thorns which choke the plants, and also some of the seed falls on good soil and brings forth abundant grain. The first time I ever heard this parable as a kid I thought it was pretty foolish for the farmer to throw seed all over the place. I wondered why God would indiscriminately throw the seeds of God's word in places and people where God knew it would not flourish? Wouldn't it be better, more sensible of God, less wasteful to throw it where it would do the most good? ...

There is therefore now no condemnation ...

I invite you to take piece of paper ... imagine you have written on that paper the one thing in your life you feel the worst about. The one part of your life that threatens condemnation – judgment from yourself, God, someone else ... Hold this before you.

“Some seed fell on the hardened path, and the birds came and ate them up.” If I look closely, with eyes wide open, I discover that there is hardness in my heart; well-walked, hard, packed-down places, formed by my judgments of others, my assumptions and prejudices concerning my own righteousness – or sometimes unrighteousness. My heart becomes more and more hardened as I travel familiar, well-worn paths, saying to myself, “Look what I’m doing” whether I judge it to be for good or for ill. And I begin to see, to understand, how, with all this hardness maybe there is no place for God’s love to take root and grow. And with my understanding little by little the ground of my being can begin to loosen up so that the love of God can take deeper root.

“Other seeds fell on rocky ground ... and they sprang up quickly since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose they were scorched; ... and they withered away.” If I listen to these words, really listen and not just hear them, I can begin to perceive rocky, shallow-soiled places in my life. Places where the joy I feel on hearing God’s word of love and forgiveness

withers away when faced with conflict, tribulation, suffering. At the first sign of a challenge to the joy I feel, having no depth of soil in which to root, I begin to look for someone with all the answers. And when those answers fail, I look for another to make it right. Or I look for someone to blame. The harder I look, the more fearful I become. And the fear narrows any possible hope, until maybe there is no possibility of hope left.

“Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.” If I try hard to understand these words in the depth of my heart, I come to know that sometimes when I hear God’s Word of love, I also hear other words; words of doubt, or self-doubt, words that promise riches and blessings to fulfill my every desire and need, if, if I just play my cards right. And soon these “words” begin to choke out God’s Word of love.

Now imagine throwing your paper with the thing that threatens you with condemnation into the trash can.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.”

The glorious, incredible, weird thing about God is that we do not have to be perfect for God to love us. Hard as this is to understand, to accept, this is what the Bible tells us. God’s love is lavished on visibly imperfect people – people just like me and you. The Bible calls on us to look at Jacob as he really

is, to look at the disciples as they really are, to look at ourselves as we really are, and then to realize that this is who God loves. God did not love Jacob because he was a cheat and a sneak. God loved Jacob because he was Jacob. God does not love me because of what I do or do not do. God loves me because I'm Deb. And God does not love you because you are good and perfect. God loves you because you are you.

If God can love Jacob – if God can love any single one of us – as we really are, then in that forgiving, unconditional love it is possible for us to turn with such love toward others.

It is only when we find ourselves stuck in the image of the totally virtuous and morally perfect person we will never be, that we are unable to accept that God does love us, and calls us to love others in the same way – in all their rich variety and varied complexity. If we open our ears to listen, our eyes to see, and our hearts to love, the soil of our being begins to loosen, the rocks are cleared, and the thorns are weeded out. Amen.

