

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – Christina Smerick

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Do you ever look at a sleeping cat or dog and wish you could change places with them? Sleeping all day, no responsibilities, being fed and cared for, the only job an occasional snuggle? Well, I do.

Last week, I got blessed—and convicted (two powerful evangelical words... what have you people done to me?) Rick reminded us, convicted me, that in following Jesus, the yoke is light. He reminded us that Jesus says, in one of my favorite passages of Scripture (thank you Soren Kierkegaard), “Come to me all ye who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.” And then he reminded us how terrible we are in hearing that invitation well, in **believing Jesus** when he says this—that Jesus’ burden is light because it’s not all up to us to carry it, to control it, to ‘do it all’ and do it well. Now y’all know me pretty well by now (I won’t sing that song by Simply Red but I hope I just put it in your head), and you therefore know that I am not a person who cedes control easily. I sat in the back last week and nodded my head off and got a little teary-eyed and here I am now, on the docket to preach the very next week. God has a sense of humor.

Part of what Rick reminded us is that our job is to do the task before us, not to control the outcome. Sometimes we inflate our own importance, we push ourselves to take on more and more responsibility, until we start to truly believe in our own prowess, our own strength. We start to believe that we truly do control the outcome, and that it is up to us. Jesus’ burden is light, Rick pointed out, because the outcome is not up to us—it’s God’s outcome, God’s glory, God’s work in the world. We are the oxen. ☺

Now Romans is far from my favorite letter of Paul’s (I’m very judgy), and I struggle with my own concepts of ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’, living as I do in the age after Descartes, where we have embraced dualism once more in many ways and fail to truly hold to the resurrection/salvation of the BODY. And it was tempting, this week, to write a nice scholarly lecture on the terms ‘sarx’ and ‘pneuma’ and ‘psyche’ and ‘soma’ and bore y’all to death with some good Greek etymology! Aren’t you glad the working of the Spirit smacked that urge out of me! Instead, as I read Romans, and read commentaries in a desperate attempt to have it salvaged for me, wonder of wonders, it was. Our reading today does have one of the best opening lines in the lectionary, powerful and hopeful and filled with conviction: *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*. Praise be to God. And the flesh/spirit divide that Paul sets up here, although it **sounds** like he hates bodies, is actually more about two ways of living: a way that focuses on what **we** want, control, and desire, and a way that focuses on what **God** wants, controls, and desires. God gave us a great gift: the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of another way to be in this world.

The prayer of Romans is that we are freed from that first way, freed from our own insight, our limited power in the flesh, and through the indwelling of the Spirit we are given new eyes, opened to new possibilities that we would not have seen on our own. Paul is speaking of a freeing—not a losing or mortification of the flesh but a new life **IN** the flesh, a new way of being

embodied. It's the yoke all over again: lay down the burden of being You, of control, and take on Jesus' burden, where you work for the Kingdom, but that Kingdom is not yours. It's not your job to Make It Happen. (Preaching to myself here: It's not my job to fix everything.) Paul's 'flesh' is more the old self, the old habits, the deadly ways we have of, under our own power, trying and failing to do what's 'right'. "Lay down your burdens" is an invitation—and yet it is one so hard to accept. Laying down one's body is the same invitation—which is probably why I get so prickly.

In the parable of the seeds, too, we find an image of our clingy, bossy selves—and here, in my slant reading, we are not the sowers (teensy control issues, as Anne Lamott says), but the soil. All too often when the thorns come up we try to secure ourselves against the world by our own power; and thus we reject the seed of the Gospel, which is a seed of dependence and grace, **not** dependent on our own power. I fear the danger of this parable is that we may sit, safe in the pews, and think we're the good soil. Why would this follow the yoke passage? What is Jesus trying to remind us of—that even when we hear the Good News, and the Invitation, we are still tempted, tempted in our very flesh, to hold onto controlling the outcomes. When times are good, it is easy. When times get hard, we want to wrestle control back from God, convinced that if we could just get a chance, we can make it right.

Which brings me to Esau and to Jacob. Oh boy. Maybe we can see ourselves in Jacob's own struggles—his desire for blessing and his manipulative ways to try to control God's blessing and secure it for himself. He probably thinks, at first, that this is all his own cleverness, his and his mother's, that **he** is the one who got himself the birthright. Silly boy. But there is also another way to read this story, a way that doesn't let us sanctimoniously condemn Jacob as the trickster bad guy, or at least makes us realize that Jacob's got a 'flesh' problem.

Keep in mind that the traditional structure of favoring the elder brother can seem pretty unfair when they're twins, and were fighting in the womb.

Amy Merrill Willis challenges us to read this otherwise than our Western lens has encouraged us; we tend to 'value' innocence and nobility in our heroes, not trickery, and also, I think, we like our men burly, direct, simple, and self-sufficient. And Esau is a man's man! He is big and hairy and hunts and fishes, and he doesn't over-complicate his own thinking. He's independent and a loner. He is the American ideal of masculinity. And Jacob—Jacob 'lives in tents'. Jacob, in a patriarchal culture, COOKS LENTILS. So imagine it! Imagine Esau swaggering into this tent his wimpy brother lives in, fresh from a day of hunting, famished, and what does he care about birthrights and lineage and being the seed of Abraham! He's hungry—hangry even.

Esau does not value his birthright—he gives it away for a bowl of soup! Jacob, however, seems to have valued the mantle of firstborn from the womb, wrestling for it, trying desperately to be the first one out. When chance or brute strength denies him the mantle by the twisted virtue of birth order, and his brother doesn't value what he's inheriting, Jacob must use trickery to ensure that the brother who will actually **value** his role gets it.

Esau wants immediate gratification, Willis argues; Jacob is willing to play the long game. He makes a lot of mistakes along the way, mostly by trying to control the situation. He gets played. And he finally realizes that, tricky as he is, he cannot defeat God.

And from this story, too, we see that God favors who God favors, regardless of our traditions, regardless as to whether we ‘approve’, and regardless as to how we try to control it all. Esau, maybe, fails to even see the gift of following God, the gift he inherits from his father and grandfather. Jacob sees it all too well, and yet has a long path of learning that, maybe, it’s not up to HIM to gain birthright and blessings and ladies. He has the burden of self to lay down too, and God has to literally wrestle it away from him. Because it’s not Jacob’s story—it’s God’s story, and Jacob has to learn, like us, the hard way, that we work for God’s glory, not our own.

So. How do we remember, how do we train ourselves to accept that we really can lay down our burdens? That we really can trust God, that if we want to be good soil (let alone sowers!), we have first to accept what we cannot control? Even the good soil can’t control what it yields. How do we calm down, and let the Spirit into our tired, tired bodies, our racing minds? How do we come to our tasks knowing that we are, at best, oxen or soil—that at best, and it is **for** the best, we are part of the work GOD does?

Practice, practice, practice. I got nothing else for you. It all comes down to mundane things. Practice. Read the Scriptures. Take the deep breaths. Sit down. Rest. As Anne Lamott wrote the other day: “I’ve written a lot about how we will survive and transcend and reverse the current reality—serve the poor, pick up litter, register voters, donate as you can, do radical self-care. There are a lot of thirsty people we can get water for, beginning with our annoying mealy-mouthed selves. Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe.”

There is no secret. The burden IS light. Every day, a little bit, we try to lay down our old tired controlling flesh and let the breath and light of the Spirit in, and let it lead us, and resist grabbing the reins. This is my prayer for you today, as Pentecostal as it sounds: let the Spirit in. It’s my prayer for myself too. Thanks be to God.