



**A Sermon for The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
July 16, 2023**



The Mess of Pottage, by James Jacques Joseph Tissot

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7 Pentecost

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Genesis 25:19-34, Matt 13:1-9, 18-23

Reap what you sow

Today we begin the Old Testament story of Jacob, who goes by many descriptive titles, including Jacob the Trickster, Jacob the Rascal, and Jacob the Jerk. Right from the beginning, while he was still in his mother's womb, he was fighting with his twin brother, Esau. His birth was complicated: he wanted to be born first, but Esau was firstborn, and Jacob followed so closely that he was holding on to his brother's heel as he emerged. The boys grew up with very different temperaments. Esau was a hunter, and his father Isaac preferred him. Jacob was more thoughtful, and he was his mother Rebekah's favorite. Given what happens next, maybe Jacob was just plotting his next move! In the Genesis account this morning, Jacob tricks his brother out of his birthright, by catching Esau when he was very vulnerable – starving, willing to give anything for a meal. Tricky Jacob fed Esau and snatched the birthright – namely, he reversed the birth order and the right to inheritance. Sometime later, Jacob makes it official by tricking his own father Isaac to give him the blessing that should have gone to Esau. Feeling a bit guilty about all these tricks and acts of dishonesty, Jacob leaves home, to make his fortune elsewhere, probably looking back over his shoulder to see if Esau is pursuing him.

You perhaps know the expression – “we reap what we sow.” Jacob's life is set in motion with tricks galore, and although God smiles upon him, and grants him much success, Jacob also has some difficult times and some pushback in his future. I wonder if the Jewish historical experience involved some tricks and payback. As they tell this story, they may think about their own history with its twists and turns.

Perhaps two millennia later, Jesus uses some images in his teaching, in his famous parable of the Sower. I wonder if there is a bit of Jacob in this parable! Jesus gives four examples of how the Word of God may be received, using seeds as the metaphor – seeds that can take root and grow, or not. The Sower is God, throwing the Word of God around with abandon, in great abundance. In the first three examples, the seed does not take root for long. In the fourth example, the Word takes root and richly expands God's kingdom.

Do you remember the reasons the Word does not take root? According to the parable, in the first instance, the seed falls on the path and the birds eat it all up – like the evil one coming and snatching away the promise of God's word. In the second case, the seed falls on rocky ground – the Word comes to a person with no root, and the troubles of life lead him away from God's Word. In the third instance, the seed falls among thorns – in this case the lure of wealth gets in the way. In the fourth case, the Word is received and roots well. Only this one, out of four instances, is successful in receiving God's Word and doing something with it.

So, back to the story of Jacob. As Jacob encounters difficulties in his own life story, it often seems as if he were asking for trouble in his behavior. Yet God came to him again and again, as if God were determined that Jacob would succeed. Jacob is a stand-in for the people of Israel – in fact, Jacob's name even changes to Israel in the most important encounter. (Tune in in two weeks). So we know that God does not give up on God's people. They may run into trouble – the people of Israel do not have an easy time. Jews tell these stories today, and they can see their subsequent history of persecution already laid out in these stories. Jesus knows all these stories, and reinterprets them for his followers, using a whole new way of teaching the truth through parables.

What do we take from these stories today? The Old Testament stories in Genesis, and Jesus's famous parables? The stories teach us about life, and about the life of faith. Clearly, one's faith journey is likely to have distractions, difficulties, times when we wonder if God is listening. But, according to the parable of the Sower, God is always with us, throwing God's grace at us with abandon, with abundance. God's goodness, God's love, does indeed take root in us if we let it. We can set up self-defeating barriers, but God loves us anyway and will keep pelting us with seed – with God's grace – urging us forward to practice love. Love that bears fruit, ever expanding, as we too become Sowers of God's love.

Amen!