

SERMON

STARTERS

Sandy Shawhan

July 14, 2002

7th Sunday after Pentecost

**Gen. 25:19-34; Ps. 119:105-112 OR
Ps. 25; Rom. 8:1-11; Mt. 13:1-9, 18-23**

Traditionally, this passage is focused on the different soil that seeds fall upon as they are planted. When such a perspective is our focus, it allows each of us to reflect upon our own lives, realizing that through the circumstances of life our lives and minds are fertile ground for many different ideas and concepts.

However, for a moment let us look through a different perspective, though one still relevant for those who call ourselves people of faith. Instead of focusing on the different types of soil, let's focus on the sower of the seeds.

In the story, consistently this sower scatters seed. Never does the sower consider the type of soil before casting the potential crop. Disseminating the seed defines this character; 'Sow and have patience for the seed to produce, as it will or will not under the influence of conditions that surround it.'

Perhaps it is time for us in the church to quit trying to sow seeds of faith only in the places that seem fecund to us. The mission fields of today are next door and within a small radius of our churches, as well as in foreign lands. May we hear the call to be a sower at home and everywhere that we travel.

Be reminded by the story that sowing is only one part of the ongoing cycle of



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life and growth. Therefore we are to realize that we are just one part of a series of events that bring another to spiritual growth. Go forth, tell your story, and trust that God will take care of the rest.

July 21, 2002

8th Sunday after Pentecost

**Gen. 28:10-19a; Ps. 139:1-12, 23-24;
Rom. 8:12-25; Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43**

It is difficult for most of us to imagine using a stone as a pillow as Jacob did on his trip to Horan. In fact, I have to admit that I take my pillow with me no matter where I travel. (Because of this, I have noticed that others have this same habit as well) Jacob's stone and my pillow provide us with an insight into a possible truth in this story.

Whether a stone or a bed pillow, we are granted through the act of rest a unique perspective, allowing us to experience the reality of God in indescribable ways. Through ordinary means, we are brought to sacred ground within the path of our own spiritual journey.

With a stone as a pillow, Jacob rested. His experience of resting on the stone brought to him new insights and understandings that deepened his relationship with God. We assume that Jacob had no idea that resting would lead him to God in a new way. Yet, as God often does, an ordinary situation was transformed into an extraordinary one.

We are commanded to rest. Resting is a sign of trust that we have in God. God is in control; I am not.

Although my pillow is not a stone, it is likewise an opportunity to experience God in new ways. With a pillow under my head to rest, my imagination has time to soar, my enthusiasm can be renewed, and/or my weariness can be exchanged for strength and energy. Like Jacob, I can awaken to realize a spiritual truth. In the ordinary act of resting my head on my pillow, God can transform me. That spot

where my head has rested has become a "holy ground" where God and I have shared together.

July 28, 2002

9th Sunday after Pentecost

**Gen. 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b;
Rom. 8:26-39; Mt. 13:31-33, 4-52**

With each passing Sunday, I am amazed at the number of children who attend our church. (You see, we have a congregation where the majority of our members are far beyond the child-rearing age.) On any given Sunday there may be 20-30 kids who enthusiastically come to worship—many of them attending without their parents.

As I read Psalm 105, the attitude of the psalmist reminds me of our kids. Whether it be the enthusiasm that they bring to wanting to be an acolyte or the eagerness they bring just to share, each child seems to radiate a smile that is contagious and praise worthy of the moment.

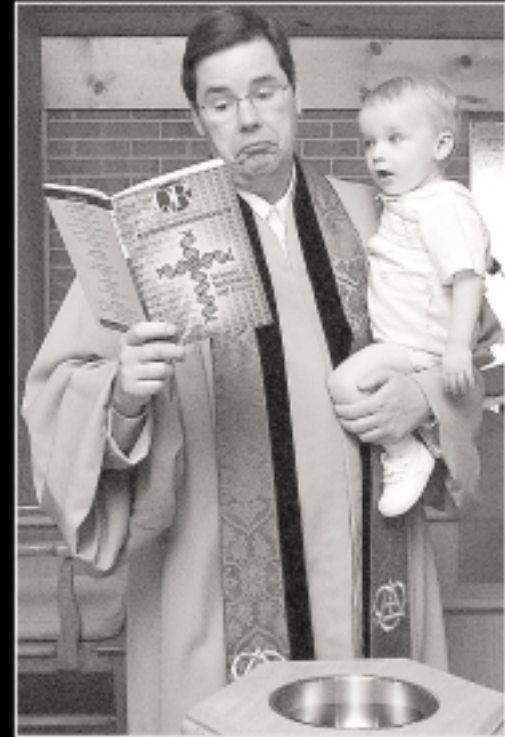
Later in the service, when the kids come down to the altar for the children's moment, their procession and their differing gaits to get to the front remind us that God's love nourishes all generations and can reach us no matter where we are.

As I share thoughts with the kids during these moments, old and young are reminded of the wonder that comes in life from the simplest of things. Each child has to see all the pictures in the story. They eagerly await an occasional gift that may be as simple as a rock or a shell from the beach.

Through these children, old and young are united in joy and thanksgiving for our God who brings us all together in our community of worship.



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August 4, 2002

10th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 32:22-31; Ps. 17:1-7, 15;

Rom. 9:1-5; Mt. 14:13-21

Jacob found himself all alone after sending his family and his possessions ahead over the stream into the land before them. Although it appeared that Jacob was alone, the story unfolds to tell us a different tale.

During the night Jacob wrestled a man/angel with such intensity that not only was he forever affected with a limp but in addition, his identity was changed as he was given a name change. Because of this experience, Jacob named the place of this event Peniel in order to mark it as his place of experiencing God.

Outside Nashville, we have a spiritual retreat center that is named Penuel Ridge. For many of us it is a place to be “alone,” to rest, and yes even a place to wrestle. Penuel marks a place where many of us go to encounter God in the ordinary experiences of nature, solitude, and a place to be away from our distractions.

When we visit the Ridge, we usually don't return with a limp and our names tend to remain the same, but nonetheless we may have had an experience that is life-changing as that of Jacob. Penuel is a place wherein God comes unexpectedly, changing us; sometimes for the moment, sometimes forever.

Everyone needs a place they call Penuel; a place where one can go to be alone with God. A place to separate ourselves from all that we value, cling to, and use as excuses of being too busy. A place where we can experience God face-to-face and find new spiritual identities.

August 11, 2002

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Ps. 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Gen. 37:1-4, 12-28; Rom. 10:5-15; Mt. 14:22-33

On some Sundays, when an adult volunteers to share a Bible story with our children, I watch the facial expressions of our kids. The inquisitive wonder in their eyes tells me that they have no memory of the story that they are hearing. The children remind me and then challenge me to remind our congregation that it is important for us to share these stories for

the first time and to repeat them over and over so that they may become familiar touchstones in the conscious mind.

Psalms 105 serves as a reminder that it is important to remember and share the stories that illustrate how God has been active in the lives of people. In the world that we live in, the media saturates us with stories that create beliefs in technology, medicine, or a whole variety of other things. Yet, do these stories give us enduring truths about the magnitude of God's grace and love for humankind? Stories can remind us of God's love and even empower an average human being (which we all are) to rise above adversity and persevere in the radiance of divine light.

As the church, we must take the time to teach the stories to our children as well as many of our adults. We need to know and be reminded that God's way is to help and to give strength to humankind throughout all of history. It is not by our merits or our efforts that we have come to this time. It is the compassion of God and God's desire to be in a loving relationship with humankind that has sustained us.

By hearing and remembering, we realize that each of us has disappointed God and turned our backs on the way that we are called to live with one another. Yet God has continued to love us and empower us beyond our own strengths.

May we continue to tell our stories and remember that whatever has occurred in our lives, God is to be praised for mysterious and wondrous ways that continue to defy our understanding.

August 18, 2002

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 45:1-15; Ps. 133; Rom. 11:1-2a, 29-32; Mt. 15 (10-20) 21-28

Stories in the scriptures are not easily understood. Matthew causes us to struggle with the exact meaning of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman.

Perhaps the woman realizes that Jesus has come for the Jews. With that knowledge she is willing to question his judgment about helping her: this was a bold act for a woman in her culture and time.

Because she is willing to acknowledge that even crumbs were of value when they fell from the table, she provides some insight for our understanding of Communion.

Each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, this parable comes to mind. We come not even deserving of the crumbs that fall when the bread is broken. Yet we are given the opportunity to partake of the whole loaf.

We, like the Cannanite woman, have questioned Jesus and in return have received all that we hoped for and even more. Jesus allows us to question and so many times gives responses that exceed our expectations.

We Christians realize that even though we don't deserve the crumbs from his table, we too are given the gift of God's love to set us free. Jesus came for all of humankind to receive the gifts he has to bestow even to those who seem to be most unworthy.

August 25, 2002

13th Sunday after Pentecost

EX. 1:8-2:1-; Ps. 124;

Rom. 12:1-8; Mt. 16:13-20

It seems so easy after a series of days, months, or even years for us to look back and want to pat ourselves on the back for all we have accomplished. It's easy to fall into the trap of believing that it is our education, our positions in the community, or the result of our hard work that has brought all the good that has come into our lives.

Psalm 124 reminds us to put things into perspective. Had not the grace of God been upon us we could not be the recipients of such blessings. Unexpected and unwanted events may occur in our lives, but we are not drowned by these misfortunes because of God's love and desire to protect us.

Thank heaven we do have hindsight. Most of us cannot see God at work in our lives in the current moment but memory helps us realize God's presence was there. In remembering we gain faith and courage to know we can face whatever may come in our future.

God's grace provides us with courage to face life and give all the credit to God. For it is the creator of heaven and earth that loves each and everyone of us as someone special enough to deserve a lifetime of being loved by God in a way that passes all our understanding. □