

“Everyday Salvation” by Pat Conover

10 July 2011



The 4th Sunday After Pentecost

We in Seekers have a lot of sources of guidance for the decisions we make. They are our version of living by the law. It is easy for us to resonate with the poetry of the portion of Psalm 119 in the lectionary for today. It is a poem about being steadfast in following the law even in difficult circumstances. It is not a dreary rote obedience, not a head down slump of conformity, not a shutting down of thinking, not shutting out real conversation with others with the hope of gaining insights or spotting creative opportunities. It is more like one of my favorite definitions of a friend. “A friend is someone who remembers your tune and sings it back to you when you have lost the melody.

“Your word is a lamp unto my feet, a light for my path.”

Keep this thought in mind as we switch attention to the story of the birth of Jacob and Esau and then of Jacob buying the inheritance from Esau who is also named as Edom, a competitive

tribe and often foe.

On the one hand, this is a story about inheritance law and Jacob getting all the herds and slaves of Isaac.

On a second hand, this is a story about enmity and warfare between one Hebrew tribe and another, conflict between two tribes that might have been hard to distinguish, tribes that were perhaps inter-marrying.

On a third hand, this is a story of conflict between an agricultural people, or at least a tribe in transition from being nomadic to becoming settled, versus a nomadic tribe that was still close to a hunter-gatherer economy.

On a fourth hand this is as a story about a tribe that depended on violence and a tribe that depended on enough peace to plant, harvest, and hold on to their food and seed.

On a fifth hand, this was a story about a collision between matriarchy (Rachel) and patriarchy (Isaac), with matriarchy winning.

On the sixth hand, this is another miraculous birth story with God acting somehow to help Rachel get pregnant though Isaac was an old man, sort of a reprise of the Abraham and Sarah story, and a model narrative for the stories in Luke about the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus.

On the seventh hand, this is a story of a theology of blood line purity, based on a speculation that God favored one blood line of people over others. It's the kind of story that leads to a Nazi holocaust, to anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, to the claim of some Israelis and U.S. fundamentalists that Israel still has a divine right to the biblical territory held three thousand years ago by King Solomon. You can think of such speculated divine favoritism as a story to justify wars of conquest, oppression of people not in your groups, slavery and colonialism. You can think of it as the doctrine of manifest destiny claimed by Europeans who had invaded North America and were pushing the boundaries of the United States to the Pacific Ocean. The doctrine of manifest destiny include defining Native Americans as savages, and claiming Central and South America as a zone of influence for the United States.

On the eighth hand this is a story about enmity between two brother seeking the favor of a father, like my story with my brother. He threw away his spiritual inheritance in violent arguments with my father and I slid into that inheritance without really trying.

On the ninth hand this is a story about Isaac getting old and not being able to call the shots anymore. That is a lot of stories to pack into 15 verses. But where is the good news of salvation in this story?

“Your word is a lamp unto my feet, a light for my path.”

Let us consider the concept of inheritance and then its

application in inheritance law.

Isaac and Rebecca had two precious things to give to their children. They were materially rich for that day: herds and fields and slaves and sojourners and relatives and servants and enough fighting strength and weapons to defend themselves. They also had a spiritual inheritance, a badly conceptualized inheritance that led in part to warfare and oppression but still carried the good news that God cared about them, that God could help them out, that faith in God could make life better. They also gave us the immense gift of living by the law, and later by written law. The Hebrew people passed their spiritual inheritance down by telling stories such as the story of Jacob and Esau.

The passing of the generations, the challenge faced by Isaac and Rebecca as they grew old, were about caring and responsibility as they passed down ownership of their material possessions. We have lawsuits and family enmity over the passing of inheritance to this day. The inheritance practice in the day of Rebecca and Isaac, recorded centuries later as biblical law, was focused on keeping the inheritance together as a unity. Division posed great dangers, in part because division set up two tribes who would be competing for water and grazing rights, etc. In a world of competing tribes, a lawless world of competing tribes, division was dangerous. It was not merely dangerous to brothers but to the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other people in the tribes. This tradition is back-story for the parable of the prodigal son for example, a story carrying quite different spiritual insights.

Rebecca and Jacob won the inheritance and they won with food

wealth and conservative practices rather than with hunting and bravery. Isaac liked Esau better, but the spiritual inheritance passed through Rebecca. Inheritance planning is a good thing. Love and respect between brothers, love and respect within families, is even better. I am trying to be at least a little responsible and a little loving in my relationship with my brother. But it aint easy.

I look on the lectionary passage in Romans as a gift from Paul that updates and cleans up some of the problems he saw in the challenge of living by the law.

“In Christ Jesus the life-giving law of the Spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death.”

From Paul’s point of view, shared by the Psalmist, we fulfill the law when we live in response to the Spirit.

I regard Paul’s perspective on this spiritual issue as a terrific example of needing to pay attention to both form and dynamics as guidance for living in the realm of God. We need form, traditions, laws, and rules, to shape agreed upon practices. Guidance in Seekers helps us know what to expect from one another. For example, we set a very high standard for constructive conversational practices, very high expectations about caring for one another.

But there are two big dangers in depending on traditions, expectations, laws, forms, the Eight Edition of the Handbook for Mission Groups, the rules we have for becoming a Steward,

etc. The first is that we are limited human beings and we carry various kinds of standpoint dependence, blind spots, and a very few of us are not deeply caring all the time. I still think, for example, that the standard of giving ten percent or more of one's income to Seekers as a rule for becoming a Steward does not reflect the best biblical guidance about giving money to Seekers and is unfair to people with little wealth and little income who want to become Stewards. Not enough Stewards have ever agreed with me enough to change that rule. I'm wrong or they are wrong or perhaps we both are wrong. Still, I'm happy that my family can meet this standard, happy to be a Steward, happy to feel deeply invested in the life and vision of Seekers, happy for mutual respect with other Stewards with whom I disagree with from time-to-time and love just the same. The tithing rule matters to me. Being part of Stewards and Seekers, starting from where we are rather than where I would like us to be, matters more.

Over the decades Seekers has changed in important ways and you can read Marjory's great history of Seekers, a true labor of love, to get a feel for that. We have an Eighth Edition of the Handbook for Mission Groups because we have grown over the years in our understanding of Mission Group dynamics, opportunities, and difficulties. I feel pretty strongly that most of the changes in Seekers have been for the good and note that a couple of changes I have opposed turned out pretty well after all.

We have changed, in part, by responding to the Spirit as we made choices in various moments over our decades together.

The story of Seekers I carry in my head is a story of affirming Paul's insight.

“In Christ Jesus the life-giving law of the Spirit has set you free from the law of sin and death.”

The good thing about honoring both law and spirit, about valuing both form and dynamics when considering guidance, is that new spiritual insight and appreciation helps us make improvements in our rules. That’s why we have an Eighth Edition of the Handbook for Mission Groups and probably will have a Ninth before too long.

The reading from Matthew is the Parable of the Sower and Matthew’s interpretation of what the parable means. I want to call attention to verses 14 and 15 which the lectionary skips over in the interest of focusing on the parable. These verses are part of an answer given by Jesus to a question about why he spoke in parables. The answer as told by Matthew reflects Matthew’s negativity about the Jewish people in general, repeats his charge that the Jewish people don’t understand their own sacred scriptures, that Christians have rightfully appropriated the spiritual inheritance of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He writes:

...you may look and look but never see, listen without hearing or understanding. The crowds who listen to me have dull minds. They have stopped their ears and shut their eyes.

Matthew misses by a mile the great spiritual challenge in the Parable of the Sower. The Sower does not behave like a farmer who follows the simple rules of agriculture. She doesn’t just sow in prepared fields, she sows on hard ground, on trodden

paths, and in the thorns and thistles. It is a parable very similar to the Parable of the Mustard Seed, in which the realm of God spreads like weeds.

Salvation is also about valuing chaos and dynamics and change and openness and vulnerability. It is about crossing boundaries. It is about going into hard places with hope, walking with Sandra in Community Vision, with New Story Leadership in Israel and Palestine, with Ron and Ody and the twins in Lesotho, with Roy Barber in Winterfeld, with our pilgrims in the Mayan highlands of Guatemala, with Jill and Joanne in Eritrea, with David's family in Uganda, with friends going through death and rebirth in Potters House and Wellspring, with Deborah as she works with her challenging thinking about the arts, with Kimberly as she picks up her calling to work with ex-offenders who are trying to create a good life for themselves after being in prison, with Sharon who strives to sustain caring and moral practices in the greeting card business, with Jesse as he sits with person after person who are dying. There are many other courage stories in Seekers, stories of overcoming addictions, stories of giving up bad habits, stories of finding work and starting businesses, stories of enduring loneliness, and more.

...you may look and look but never see, listen without hearing or understanding. The crowds who listen to me have dull minds. They have stopped their ears and shut their eyes.

We are called to look and see what we would rather avoid. We pray about things we cannot do anything about. We are trying to keep our ears unstopped and our eyes open.

Listening and looking for the guidance of God as the Holy Spirit, as the Diving Presence, as God available to our experience in every moment of our lives, is not about looking for something supernatural, or speculative, or highly unusual, or deeply hidden. It is more than enough challenge to look and listen for what love, faith, hope, caring, responsibility, vulnerability, and the Eighth Edition of the Handbook for Mission Groups, make possible. It is enough to claim the courage to move from the perception of possibility to engaging the challenges of opportunity.