

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

July 10, 2011

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: "Gotta Have It"

Genesis 25: 19-34, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

One of my favorite courses in college was child development. In this class, we future elementary school teachers learned about the stages of growth and maturity in children from birth to age 12. One of the insights gained in those classes was that each child is born with its own character and personality. From a Christian viewpoint, we would say that God gives these aspects to each child in the womb for a purpose. Mothers can often tell something about an infant's personality by how they behave in the womb: are they quiet or do they kick and jump around a lot. Mothers of twins, like Rebekah in the passage from Genesis really must have fun with this.

Rebekah had been barren, and she and her husband, Isaac prayed to God for a child. Finally when Rebekah was 60 years-old, God answered their prayers with twin boys who wrestled with each other in the womb so greatly that Rebekah could hardly take it. She inquired of the Lord as to what was going on, and the Lord revealed that "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." In other words, Rebekah and Isaac, your life is about to be turned outside down.

When the boys were born their differences were obvious. Esau, the first born, was a red headed hairy child who became a hunter. He was a down to earth, non-materialistic, straight shooting kind of guy. Jacob, the second born, was more civilized, genteel, materialistic and conniving. Talk about opposites. As we heard in the scriptures, the parents, Isaac and Rebekah had their favorites. Rebekah wanted Jacob to have the greatest share of the family property, but that belonged to Esau as the first born. It would appear that Jacob wanted the greatest share, too. For one day, when his oldest brother Esau came in from an unsuccessful hunt and was famished; it "so happened" that Jacob had some delicious stew waiting for him. It was like baiting hungry wild game. The cost of the meal, according to Jacob was Esau's first right to the family goods and land. Now here is where they were alike: They both behaved in an "I gotta have it" manner. Esau sold out his inheritance for a meal. Jacob sold out his integrity for a birthright. They just "gotta have it" at any cost.

Without asking for any response from anyone, haven't we all done that in some way, at some time in our lives? Is there not some material object, some kind of food, some relationship to a person, or some opportunity to grab some power that we felt that we just "gotta have it" and we took it whether or not it was good for us, and others? In last week's Epistle Lesson, the Apostle Paul expressed these phenomena all too well: "but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 8: 14, 15, 19). Everyone from legitimate sales people to shysters from eons ago discovered this weakness about us and continue to use it to work on us in all sorts of ways. Were not these future heroes of the Jewish faith, Esau and Jacob, just like you and me in

how they handled the stew and the birthright? They, and we just “gotta have it” and they and we take it whether or not it was good for us and others.

Then, in our moments of reflection upon what we did when we gave into “gotta have it” we may cry out as Paul did in Romans: ‘Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ For eternal death is the direction we are headed.

Lest we despair, and give up hope, there is lots of good news to be found in studies of our human development from birth to adulthood and in the passages from Romans and Matthew. The one true God, who gave us our personalities and character in the womb, also guides us to learn from our mistakes and mature into responsible human beings; if we will but listen, learn and follow him. As we follow God we can see that he turns the “gotta have it” of our desires to the “you gotta have this” of his will. In Jesus Christ, God changes the “gotta have it” that only leads to eternal death to the “you gotta have this” that gifts us with everlasting life. There is a great correlation between our natural growth as humans and our maturation in the Christian faith. The best Christian curriculums for children, youth and adults recognize this, and use it to teach us about God in Jesus Christ and how we are to live out our faith in him. It points us to the same good news of God’s ways as in the passages from Matthew and Romans.

In the parable of the seeds and soil in Matthew, we learn that human and faith development take time and nurture. The change in us from the “gotta have it” of our desires to the “you gotta have this” of God’s will normally does not happen overnight. Sown seeds usually take many weeks to become mature plants. The soil has to have the right moisture and minerals to nurture the plant. Whenever I have studied this parable of the seeds and the soil with children, youth and adults, I have asked them what kind of soil they were, hard packed, rocky, shallow or deep and rich. They wisely said that they could be all four depending upon the day. Honest answers. It takes some maturity to realize this. They then said that most of the time they were deep and rich soil. I would guess that most of us could say the same as we grow physically and are nurtured spiritually in the Lord and the Kingdom of God; as we mature from the “gotta have it” of our desires to the “you gotta have this” of God’s will.

In the passage in Romans, Paul celebrates his growth in Christ, and also gives us a pathway to follow as we mature in our faith. Because of his faith in God in Jesus Christ he was given the gift of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God with us on earth. As we have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord, we too have been given the same Spirit. It is this Holy Spirit that helped him and helps us as we wrestle free from the power of sin, the destructive ways of human flesh, or the “I gotta have it” enslavement. Paul wrote that to live by the power of the Holy Spirit means at least two things: we mature or are transformed as individuals into the “you gotta have this” of salvation in Jesus Christ: And, we begin to transform the world around us to the ways of the Lord.

What might the “you gotta have this” of God in Jesus Christ, the saving power of the Holy Spirit and maturing growth from good soil look like?

As I worked on these same scriptures in 1999 at the Flossmoor Community Church near Chicago, a member of that church named Walter Flor, dropped in unexpectedly to see me. I did not really have time to see him, but made time and am

glad I did. Walter said that he had a God involved story to share with me. When he finished I was stunned by the reality of the story and how it fit with the characters in Genesis 25, the words of Paul in Romans 8 and the seeds and soil of Matthew 13. Walter read these scriptures and then wrote out the story for me to use in a sermon.

Walter wrote: "St. Paul's 2000 year old letter to the Romans clearly tells us what we experience today. Our lives are a contest between things of the world and things of the Spirit. Sometimes God waits until we are utterly exhausted with things of this world to show himself to us. Sometimes modern life is so raucous and noisy that we cannot hear that still small voice within. We can become numb to God's presence. My friend, Jason, found himself in this predicament."

"By August, 1997, the world had crowded in on Jason. Now in his middle fifties, he was a walking dead man. Jason had been an alcoholic for thirty-five years. He lost every job he had. He became suicidal. His home life disintegrated. He had been in and out of AA, hospital and detox programs. His wife threw him out of the house and proceeded to divorce him."

St. Matthew wrote of God, the sower of the seed. It was obvious to me that when the Almighty had sown Jason, his seed had been cast in the rocks. He had withered and turned to dust years ago. Jason had come into our lives as an unwanted complication. Sis, Walter's wife, even had to take him to a detox hospital at 3 A.M. one night. But, Jason failed again." Thankfully this was not the end of the story. Things began to change in God's "you gotta have this" way as sobriety became desirable in Jason's life.

One day in 1998, as Walter, who is a dentist, was working on a patient, the patient said, "You have an unusual name. Are you related to Jason Flor?" I swallowed hard and said I was."

"The patient began his story. 'Jason saved my life over twenty years ago when we were both accountants at the same company. I was a compulsive gambler and no one knew it. I had lost absolutely everything and had decided to kill myself. Jason got me out of there, took me to coffee and got me in touch with Gamblers Anonymous. Eventually I got my life turned around, started my own company and have grown wealthy. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for Jason's kindness over twenty years ago.'" Walter reports that the hair on the back of his neck was standing up. The man asked about Jason, who was between positions, and told Walter to have Jason call him because he needed someone new in the accounting department of his company. Walter also reports that the whole dental office staff was on cloud nine. He writes that, 'Sometimes my job is fixing teeth and sometimes it is being open to God's voice.'

When Walter called to tell Jason about the job opportunity, Jason was less than enthusiastic. Walter sat down to have a serious talk with Jason and told him, "Listen to me. You may have only done a few good deeds in your life, but this one has come back to help you. Divine providence happened to start a chain of events over twenty ago. How it plays out is up to you. An unknown person from your past happened to be in Homewood today, an hour from his own home. He lost a crown while playing golf and was brought to my office. He connected our last name and knew that he needed an

accountant. Perhaps God has decided to put a compulsive gambler and a compulsive alcoholic together. The Divine coincidence is too powerful to ignore. God has turned up the volume so loud that he's trying to reach you."

There is much more to this story that caused Jason to see God's hand in his life, but Jason took the job and still works there. His story of fighting to stay sober continues today. An act of kindness he did many years ago paid big dividends.

Walter closes with, "Everyone's life is a contest between holding fast to the attractions of this world and holding fast to God's hand. That dynamic tension between the two was true in St. Paul's day and it is true today. The divine presence allows our seed to germinate and to grow deep roots. Let us remind each other of God's presence among us. We walk on hallowed ground each day right here in our own community. The God of miracles is still hard at work."

I will always be thankful to Walter for this true story and for interrupting me!!

The story of God changing Walter's brother from the "I gotta have it" of our desires to the "you gotta have this" of God's will is what God did with Jacob and Easu as we will hear in the coming weeks. It is the planting, nurturing and maturing process God works in our bodies, minds and sense of faith from the moment we are born. May we always be open to the "you gotta have this" of God's ways as we all mature "in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in us." With this Spirit in us let us open our hymns books to number 369 and sing the first verse of a song of positive response to God's gifts and ways that mature and save us.....

"I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me" No. 369.

I'm gonna live so God can use me, anywhere, Lord, anytime!

I'm gonna live so God can use me, anywhere, Lord, anytime!

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