

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 12, Year A (both tracks)

First Reading

Genesis 29:15–28 (track one)

Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” Laban said, “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.” Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (ESV)

1 Kings 3:5–12 (track two)

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, “Ask what I shall give you.” And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 8:26–39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.” (ESV)

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all these things?” They said to him, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Genesis text (track one)

The story of Jacob and his taking of the daughters of Laban as wives is peculiar, historically, but teeming with meaning, narratively.

Set in its historic context, it appears to go against certain customs of the time while resembling one such custom that has little (but nonetheless some) support in ancient text.

First, it was far more common at the time this story was written that the family of the bride would provide her with a dowry of sorts at the time of her marriage. In our story, Jacob has to earn both his wives. The daughters’ later complaint that they are likely to receive nothing only strengthens the contrast with the prevailing practice.

Instead, Jacob works to earn each of Laban's daughters, providing with his labor a "bride-price." While this practice had some earlier support in the "sale" of a woman to another family as a bride, parallel to the sale of a slave, it had become exceedingly rare by the first century BC. There is, however, one extant contract from the period that indicates that one family did buy a bride for their son from another family. While this is somewhat similar to Jacob's story, I don't think it's the point.

The point lies in the reversals in the narrative, the reversal of a norm established early on in Genesis, that of a man "knowing" his wife and the reversal of Jacob's earlier trickery. The larger sense of "to know" used in this fashion carries with it the implication of ownership, of dominance. Jacob works for seven years to earn the hand of Rachel, and yet, when he goes in to his wife, he does not "know" her. He believes that he "knows" Rachel in the dark, and his ownership, his dominance is undone. This is not just the undoing of Jacob, but of the male pattern of "knowledge" that characterizes Genesis, and it is the purpose of the author of Genesis to do just that.

The second narrative function of this trick played on Jacob is to echo the trick Jacob played on Isaac and Esau by stealing Esau's blessing. That which Esau deserved has come to Jacob, so that which Jacob earned through seven years of labor is denied him.

Until I studied it more carefully, I had always read this story in way that cast Laban in a bad light. While I suppose there's still an element of that in these verses for me, I now see it as a story much more about God's dealing with the unjust "knowledge" of women by men and the equally unjust trick that Jacob had played on his father and brother.

1 Kings reading (track two)

Solomon's dream from our reading this week might cause us to conclude that Scripture's view of the king was fundamentally positive, but this would be a mistake. It's one of the dangers of reading a passage without its larger context.

This particular text is one of the most positive of the narratives concerning Solomon's accession and reign in 1 Kings. We might say the same of the story that follows, the one concerning Solomon's ruling concerning the two women and the baby. But threaded throughout the first ten chapters of 1 Kings are intimations of the condemnation that will characterize chapter 11. Solomon's first acts in chapter 3, while represented positively at this point, are paralleled in chapter 11 by the very same acts for which he is condemned.

All in all, I tend to think that our reading today and the whole of chapters 1-11 result from a later author's attempt to reconcile a sanitized, overly exalted image of Solomon

with the reality that his reign contributed enormously to the division between Northern and Southern kingdoms and the collapse of the monarchy and the defeat of God's people in both North and South.

Contributing to this impression of mine is the reality that our story of Solomon's dream is far from unique among the peoples of that region. While scholars have long recognized the similarity of this narrative to Egyptian sources, it has lately come to light that similar stories of royal dreams and blessings can be found in Syro-Palestinian texts as well. That the author of 1 Kings imitated in his telling of this dream the exaltation of kings in other cultures suggests to me that they are acknowledging the desire to hold on to a positive image of Solomon in the midst of the chaos of Persian domination. I think they do this by nesting this positive text in the midst of narratives that are at least ambiguous in their evaluation of the king.

We desperately want our leaders to be the faultless, glorious people we think we need. But in retrospect their clay feet just refuse to stay hidden.

Second Reading

As with the readings from the last two weeks, the exalted nature of Paul's rhetoric in the lections for this Sunday tempts us to read it on its own, no longer moored to its setting in the Roman church. (Though I speak of the church singularly, I do recognize that Christians in Rome worshiped in a number of smaller synagogue congregations, as many as 11 of them.) And as I have done with the readings from each of the last two weeks, I will continue to try to ground this week's reading in its local and contingent purpose.

As encouraging as this week's verses are, we find the same pattern of building up the readers while continuing to hold in tension the difficulties that should bring humility as well. So we read that the Spirit helps us, but "in our weakness." The Spirit prays on our behalf with groans too deep for words, but only because "we do not know how to pray as we ought." In one of Paul's most frequently quoted verses, we know that God works all things together for good. But this reference to "all things" is clearly an indication that in some of the things being experienced Paul's Roman readers it is very difficult to tell just how that is. (Unless we refer back to his explanation of the praiseworthiness of suffering in chapter 5.)

In the verses to follow, Paul soars to previously untraveled heights. "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also

glorified.” We are unshakably located in Christ, because we were predestined. Because God desires that we be siblings of Christ, of whom He is firstborn. And then, in a clear echo of the progression about suffering I mentioned above at the end of chapter 5, Paul leads us not to hope, but to glorification. And yes, he meant this verse to imitate in form those verses from the fifth chapter.

So Paul lands on “glorified.” Speaking about his readers. And why? Because we need to hold on to that in the face of the verses to follow. There are those who do threaten his readers. After reminding them that God will sustain them throughout, Paul gives us a list of the threats. “Tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword.”

Then he quotes Psalm 44, verse 22.

As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” (ESV)

And then he concludes this portion of his exhortation with the following.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (ESV)

But Paul’s purpose is not just to build up a congregation that is threatened. He covers them with glory while holding before them their own weakness and inability to pray or do as they ought. And his reason for this follows in chapter 9, where he begins,

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Paul has not begun a new argument. He has not shifted gears. Everything that came before leads up to this moment, where he speaks on behalf of his “brothers,” the

“Israelites,” the Jews. In chapter 9 he posits that the Gentiles are children of God, not of the flesh, but of the promise, the same promise to which every Jew is heir.

This is why we cannot read the conflict in Rome as one between Law-adherent, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Because Paul is speaking with absolute clarity about the Gentile Christians kinship (through the promise) with *their* brothers, the Israelites. It is the Jewish portion of the synagogue congregations with whom the Christians worship on whose behalf Paul speaks. Chapter 9 makes any interpretation of Romans that doesn't include Jews, not Jewish Christians, deeply flawed.

It is unfortunate that the only Sunday lection devoted to chapter 9 will be superseded by Transfiguration Sunday this year, but Proper 13 does include Romans 9:1-5. Given this omission, I hope you'll read a little in to that chapter to help make sense of the ones that go before.

Gospel Text

In our reading from Matthew 13 this week we have this long string of parables. These tend to be shorter, pithier stories, whose point is not as difficult as some that required more interpretive effort.

In the first two there is echoed the theme of “from small to great.” For Matthew's audience this would be a clear reference to how small they perceived themselves and yet how great was the future of the Church. In one commentary I read, it was recounted that at the time of Jesus, people were generally advised *not* to plant a mustard seed in their gardens, as they grew so large so rapidly that they would soon take over too much space. Here is the hope held out to a small and persecuted minority.

In the next two parables I would suggest that the theme that links them is “hiddenness.” At the time of Matthew's writing, the incomparable value of the Gospel of the Kingdom is hidden from the many and chosen/purchased only by the few.

The last parable for this week is largely parallel to the parable of the wheat and the weeds from last week. In it we find good and evil mixed until the coming of the end, at which time the evil will be thrown into the furnace, the fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

I would like to reiterate something from last week. This parable and that of the wheat and weeds seem clearly to point toward the church, not the larger world. Both images of the kingdom gather the wanted and the unwanted together, out of the field (the world) and out of the sea (a place of chaos). Both wheat and weeds are gathered, both good fish

and bad. But I maintain that it does not point to persons within the church, but good and evil beliefs/teachings.

In the parable of the wheat, though, we have the clear indication that it is the “fruit” (the wrong teachings/beliefs) of the evil one that is cast into the furnace. There is the parabolic opportunity to read into it another “wrong” interpretation, casting judgment on persons, not beliefs. This is, after all, one of the purposes of a parable, to read you as much as you read it.

In this week’s parable the “fruit” metaphor is less clear, though I’d suggest it is still there. As the “world” is a place of disorder, so also is the sea, for the people of Jesus’ time. What is more, the sea is also an entity that carries a certain agency. So when it causes a ruckus while Jesus and the disciples are floundering in a boat, Jesus “rebukes” the sea. So the sea is an agent that produces both good and evil, just as the field of the world does. Especially given its similarity to the earlier parable of the wheat and weeds, this parable begs to be read in a likewise fashion. And it confronts us with the same choice. Will we read the Gospel as a story of exclusion, or one of casting aside wrong ideas, of changing minds, of *metanoia*, of repentance?