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Pilgrim United Church of Christ
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Scripture: [Genesis 25:19-34](#) and [Matthew 25:1-9](#).

Earlier this week I dreamt that one thing led to another and I didn't have time to write a sermon for today. In my subconscious night vision, I was sitting up here anxiously trying to figure out what I would say, wishing I had the gift of Ellen to just walk into the center of the chancel and preach from the Spirit -- no shoes, no manuscript, no problem. But even in my dreams speaking extemporaneously is not my spiritual gift.

You all saved me: in my dream, the announcements dragged on until 11:25. So all I had to do was give the benediction and *go in peace!*

Late in the week I honestly had no idea where I was going to go with these scripture readings -- or, more appropriately, where they were going to take me -- not unlike a hostage situation. Looking at the passages offered up by the lectionary, I hoped for a scene like the one we read about a couple of weeks ago when Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac until an angel of the LORD swept in and said, "No, no, no -- stop -- just kidding -- you don't have to do that." But by Friday I suspected there was no alternative story off to the side waiting to swoop in and rescue me.

And so I sat down with all my trusty supplies -- my ragged bible whose spine now functions as a bookmark, a few other possibly relevant books, printed scripture I'd been marking over all week, several notebook pages of thoughts and questions... a huge cup of coffee. All of this spread across our dining room table (the most use that piece of furniture ever gets). And I stared at the spread like a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle of... dirt.

Like a jigsaw puzzle, I started picking up the word pieces and turning them over, turning them around, looking closer. Many of you have heard me quote one of my favorite ancient rabbis, Ben Bag-Bag (so much is in a name!), who is quoted in the Mishna, sometimes called the “Oral Torah,” as saying of scripture: *Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow gray with it. Don’t turn from it, for nothing is better than it.*

Like Ben Bag-Bag, I turned and turned the scriptures. And began to see something.

...

Maybe we can think about the readings we’ve just heard like Rebekah’s twins, Esau and Jacob: arriving in our presence today together, only moments apart, but distinctly different from one another, struggling with one another and us -- not immediately making sense, on the surface not exactly going together.

How many of us can identify with family dysfunction or conflict, with familial rivalry or favoritism, with sometimes having a hard time relating to the people we’re related to? (If there are currently family members here answering those questions differently right now, I’m sorry, *and* you’re proving my point.)

The story of the birth and youth of Jacob and Esau is kind of like looking into a mirror, isn’t it? I’m not calling anyone hairy or rough-looking, but the truth is we can all relate to challenging family dynamics. And maybe our position in our families correlates to the way we read the story. Maybe we find ourselves sympathizing with one character, scoffing at another, because of our own experiences with family conflict.

Like many of the stories in Genesis, the birth and birthright story of Esau and Jacob is legendary: rooted in the oral storytelling tradition, it is not

interested in narrating what *actually, literally* happened. As legend, it's a story that aims to please, inspire, move -- at least its original hearers, the people of Israel (*Jacob's* people, it is important to note). The birth story is both etymological and ethnological legend, attempting to explain the origin of names and customs -- not only of these two particular brothers, Jacob and Esau, but, as the scripture tells us, the neighboring, divided nations they represent: Israel and Edom.

Any of us who have been part of families of any kind -- biological families, chosen families, church families -- can understand how an ancient conflict, a long-ago wrong-doing, can stay with individuals and communities for years, can shape trajectories, can become parts of core identities, even.

And for those who know the longer story of Jacob and Esau, it's tempting to fast-forward, to zoom out to the bigger picture, to flip forward a few chapters in Genesis. Spoiler alert, for those who aren't as familiar with their story: after many years, after even greater manipulation and conflict, separation and despair, the two brothers eventually reunite and reconcile. It's tempting to point and rush to that, but then we miss -- we dismiss -- the words we hear this morning, the "You Are Here" sign marking the rocky ground underneath us today.

A rushed reading of the birth and birthright story misses its fullness. If we're not careful, we hear that Isaac pleaded to the LORD and soon Rebekah, supposedly barren, conceived. But if we're paying attention, we know that's not exactly what happened. We're told Isaac and Rebekah married when Isaac was 40; and Rebekah gave birth when Isaac was 60. Sometime during a span of 20 years, Isaac pleaded to the LORD. Probably more than once, and probably not alone. After they had been married for nearly *two decades*, Rebekah conceived.

If we don't hold our ears to this story, we miss its sacred echoes: The theme of the barren woman is familiar: like the story's original audience, we remember Isaac's parents, Abraham and Sarah, who did not conceive until

Abraham was one hundred years old. Throughout the Bible, pregnancy after presumed barrenness signifies God's ability to sow possibility and hope into the soil of despair.¹

If we don't hold our ears to this story, we miss its sacred echoes: The theme of the younger and older son role reversal strikes another common chord. Throughout biblical texts, several younger sons prevail over their older siblings -- Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, the unnamed prodigal son... -- subverting the expectations, conventions, and laws of their time. This recurrence suggests God's tendency to identify with and move through the weaker and marginalized -- those least favored by society.

Let anyone with ears listen!

...

When Jesus says *Let anyone with ears listen*, he is joining a long line of prophets who called people beyond merely hearing sounds into discerning the voice and moving presence of God. Going out onto the water, just off the shore where he called the first disciples, Jesus compels the crowd to put their ears to the ground.

The Gospel of Matthew shows crowds following Jesus -- some responding to his teachings and healings, while others, especially societal leaders and religious authorities, reject him. In chapter 13, from which today's reading

¹ Just for the record, though the texts say these women were barren, we know that may not have actually been the case. To the original tellers and hearers of these stories, an inability to conceive was automatically attributed to the women. Shocker. To use images from Jesus' parable, people of the ancient Near East believed the father's "seed" was planted into the fertile field of the mother's womb; if the seed didn't take root, the mother's womb must have been a barren path or rocky ground. Biology has since given us a better understanding of the numerous and complicated reasons a couple might not conceive. Sometimes God is still speaking through science.

comes, the momentum of the gospel pauses to consider the distinct responses to Jesus.

Our passage today is the first of seven parables Jesus tells here. The word *parable* comes from a Greek word meaning “to throw alongside.” Like legends, parables are less concerned with actuality and more concerned with inspiring, moving -- provoking their hearers -- to turn them, and turn them, to listen with more than ears and reflect on them...

Jesus uses images familiar to a largely rural audience who understood how to cultivate the land around them: seeds, birds, rocky ground, thorns, good soil, grain... Those of us glued to our screens probably aren't his target audience. Except you Farm Heroes -- you got this parable right away, didn't you? (For those of you blissfully unaware, Farm Heroes is an online game where players, I don't know, crush crops or something.)

In her book, *Grounded*, religious scholar Diana Butler Bass writes:

Generations ago, no one would have wondered about God and dirt, for divinity and soil were easy companions. In a pre-industrial world, Creator and creation were part of the same theological ecosystem: the ground was created and sustained by a gracious God who walked about in a garden and whose son, Jesus, spun agricultural tales for his hearers' spiritual benefit. For the better part of the last two centuries, however, most of us have forgotten the deep earthy perspectives of sacred texts. And most of us have had to relearn the relationship between God and dirt. Except farmers. They remember.

Bass quotes journalist Kristin Ohlson, who explains her shock in learning about mysterious and complex life underfoot: “When we stand on the surface of the earth, we're atop a vast underground kingdom of microorganisms without which life as we know it wouldn't exist. Trillions of microorganisms. . . like a great dark sea swarming with tiny creatures.”

The thing about dirt is that it contains so much more than we can see -- much more than we give it credit for when we try to stomp it off, and sweep it up, and wash it out.

Dirt -- soil -- appreciates time and process, celebrates small beginnings and the tiniest of pieces, values what is happening under the surface and behind the scenes.

In that way, dirt is a revelation of God. Even dirt with rocks and thorns.

Though our gospel reading centers on types of soil, it is called the “Parable of the Sower.” It’s easy to keep our eyes on the ground, but what if we look up? What about the sower?

The sower, we’re told, sows extravagantly -- on all types of soil. Shouldn’t he or she know better than to throw seed on rocky soil, or in thorns, or on a bare *path*? Wouldn’t someone with even minimal experience with seeds and grain show better judgment?

Not this sower; she or he sows everywhere, with abandon -- like Oprah giving out prizes -- really flying in the face of our modern Western business sense.

...

Here is the thing: God is not an admirer of what we see and have claimed as advantageous: of being older (or younger) or stronger, of being in the right light or place with an ideal background or underground.

God sows -- God scatters seeds -- without regard to conditions. In fact, biblical evidence suggests God *prefers* crappy soil on the margins, underdogs and misfits: in other words, the ones we would never bet on. In

other words, ourselves. God digs in the dirt and dysfunction, breathes into it and abides there.

Communion plates of soil are being passed to remind us of God's presence in the dirt and dirty, to remind us of the sacrament of soil. Take and pass, hold the soil in your hand and on your fingers...

What feels like a barren path to you these days? What appears to be disadvantage or imperfection? What is your Achilles né Esau heel?

Whatever it is that seems not enough, know this: you are in good company, where and who you are. Mark your skin with the soil you hold, in the name of the Creator and of the Christ and of the Holy Spirit. Remember the Gardening God and living ground of your being -- from whom you came, in whom you grow, to whom you will return.

Let anyone with ears listen. Amen.