

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

ACNA Readings – 1 Kings 3:3-14; Psalm 119:121-136; Romans 8:26-34; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-50

Introduction. If Jesus promised never to leave or forsake us and that he is always with us, then why does the Bible say I should try and seek him? Did he go somewhere while we weren't watching? No, of course not! When we are being honest with ourselves we know that there are times and seasons in which we become neglectful of the presence of God – especially in the neglect of his Word! 1 Chronicles 22:19 says; “Now set your heart and soul to seek the Lord your God.” These were the words of King David to the builders of the Temple, and these words of admonition were given in the context of work, not in the context of leisure time. We do not need to find free time to seek God, we should seek him all the time.

Common Theme. One theme in our texts this week encourages us to continue seeking the Lord. We also know that seeking God is not always an easy thing to do. Not because God is being elusive or he is so remote he cannot be found, but because our fallen world saturates our culture with misconceptions and untruths about our unworthiness to seek the Lord and God's desire to be found. Recall the prophet Jeremiah's words to the exiles when all hope seemed to have been lost: "You will seek Me and you will find Me when you reach for Me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13).

Genesis 29:15-28. The Genesis reading opens with Laban and Jacob in a discussion over the appropriate dowry for Rachel. Jacob was the son of a wealthy man – Isaac – but since fleeing his family home he had very little to show for himself. It was the custom in the Ancient Near East to give the bride's father a substantial monetary gift during the negotiations towards marriage. Jacob has no money or property to trade for Rachel but he does have some skills he can offer.

While Jacob was most likely no stranger to hard work, his father Isaac probably had the servants do most of the heavy lifting. Interestingly Jacob now has to serve and work as a servant does, learning as it were how to truly be a servant. This is a good lesson for all of us. The Hebrew word for serve – עָבַד *avad* – is used seven times while Jacob is working for Laban (Gen 29:15-30:43). Jacob toils long – seven years – for the prize that he seeks, Rachel.

In the end, though, Jacob who had deceived his father to receive the blessing due to his brother, is himself deceived. Paul reminds us in Galatians 6:7 that we reap what we sow. Laban tricks Jacob into a marriage with Leah, the older sister. Exactly how Jacob does not recognize Leah during the wedding is unclear. However, his love and passion for Rachel are not diminished, and Jacob will serve another seven years for her. This story is more about personal sacrifice as Jacob gives up everything for 14 years to marry the love of his life. The challenge for us is whether we will seek the Lord with as much love, long-suffering, hard work, and passion as Jacob does for Rachel.

Psalm 105:1-11, 45b. It's not what goes into your mouth that's impure in this psalm; it's what comes out! Prayers come from our lips, but their source is from the heart. Psalms are great prayers to guide

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the words of our mouths and meditations of our hearts towards the true things of God. This psalm is a praise to God for his continued faithfulness, which in all honesty is something we probably take for granted all too often. We are instructed to make the deeds of God known to all the earth and not just to enjoy God's blessings for ourselves.

Important to our theme today, verse four commands us to "Seek the Lord and His continual presence." The Hebrew is literally to seek his face forever, which is to be in his continual presence – accessing his blessing and mercies, which are new every morning, and guarded by his strength and power. God does not want us to be distant from him. The Lord has always sought a relationship with his creation, ever since he left heaven to walk in the Garden with Adam in the cool of the evening.

God is always faithful and he declares again that he remembers the covenant that he has made with Israel. Memory in the Bible is not linked to forgetfulness, for God cannot forget anything. The Hebraic perspective of memory is one that is linked to action. When you remember something you do something! The covenant that the Lord remembers in this psalm is the covenant he made with the Patriarchs and with the people of Israel.

Verse 11 reminds us that part of that covenant is an inheritance of the land of Canaan. A politically contentious thing to say in our modern world. Verses like these (v. 11) should not be ignored, overlooked, or overhyped. Rather they serve to remind us of God's faithfulness and the role that Israel has to play as the covenant people until the end of the age.

Romans 8:26-39. If prayers are so important – and they are – then what should we pray for? Paul speaks honestly when he writes that, when we are weak we do not know how we ought to pray. Sometimes we pray amiss – distracted by concerns of the world or for things not according to the will of God. Surely though we are not referring to liturgical prayers being something prayed amiss as they are usually psalms or other direct quotes from Scripture.

Instead, Paul seems to be referring to some sort of quiet prayer from the heart. The heart is something that God is intimately familiar with, even more than we are. The good news is that the Spirit intercedes wordlessly while our heart wrestles with what to concern our prayers about. The Father and the Spirit are one, and so when the Spirit intercedes for God's people we can be assured that it is in accordance with the will of God.

While we wrestle with our prayers and the thoughts of our hearts, Paul reminds us with a comforting truth that "all things ... work for the good of those who love Him." Often waiting for the *good things to come* can be hard and frustrating at times. To reassure us that God is indeed working on our behalf, Paul takes about God's foreknowledge.

In the late second Temple period, Jewish people strongly believed in the sovereignty of God over all time – the past, the present, and the future. They also had a strong tradition of the acceptance of free will. They held the concepts of both predestination and free will in tension. A typical rabbinic

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expression was, “all things are in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven.” God could exist outside time and thus have full knowledge of the future and at the same time allow himself to dwell inside time and be affected by time.

For example, God – who made time – rested on the Sabbath, which means he is now existing inside time and was affected by doing so in being refreshed (See Exod 31:17). The Hebrew minds had several thousand years longer than Christianity to embrace some of the mysteries of God. Paul then reaffirms us by declaring that God is definitely for us. He knows us better than we know ourselves, even when we don't know what to pray for or how to seek him. Nothing – including not knowing how to pray – can separate us from God.

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52. Jesus introduces his parables with the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven is like.” The kingdom of heaven is synonymous with the kingdom of God – which is the preferred term in the other gospels. *The kingdom of heaven* is a central theme that is unique to Matthew, with the phrase occurring 33 times throughout the Gospel. Some commentators suggest Matthew is being sensitive to the name of God, replacing God with heaven to avoid writing the divine name. However, the phrase kingdom of God does occur four times in Matthew so that explanation quickly falls flat. Scholars argue the use of the term kingdom of heaven suggests a Hebrew original text of Matthew, as the term is classic Hebrew phraseology still in use to this day.

The term itself begs the question, where is the kingdom of heaven? Is it in heaven and therefore out of reach for humanity, or will the kingdom materialise with the advent of the Messiah? In Hebraic thought, the kingdom of heaven is wherever God is ruling and reigning and where his will is being done. Thus, the kingdom of heaven is a present reality and also a future one. God is sitting on his throne and reigning now and will continue to reign in the future. Jesus responds to this question by the Pharisees – “where is the kingdom” – by declaring that the kingdom is within you (Luke 17:20-21).

The parables of Jesus help describe kingdom life and what it's like to live with God as your king. In this week's Gospel portion, we encounter six of those parables and four of them are unique to Matthew's Gospel: the wheat and the weeds, the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the net. There is often a shock to the story in a parable to keep people's attention and create questions that aid in teaching and learning.

To begin with, we see the strange behaviour of the farmer who plants a mustard seed in the middle of a field. Why would a farmer desire to plant a weed bush that will grow and allow birds to come and eat his growing harvest?

Why would a woman want to put yeast in such a large amount of dough all at once and not preserve at least some of the dough to make unleavened bread that could be used in Temple worship? Leaven is often used by commentators as a symbol of sin. However, nowhere in the Bible is it used or said that leaven is such a symbol. Leaven is used as a metaphor for influence, which could be both

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positive and negative. Yeast is used consistently in baking throughout history and has a positive influence on all baking products.

When Jesus warns his disciples of the “leaven of the Pharisees,” he is warning of their influence in the community. The teaching of the Pharisees is not essentially evil as Jesus also says, “so practice and observe all that they tell you” (Matthew 23:3). These two parables demonstrate the unseen, unlikely, and unstoppable way in which the Kingdom – that is God’s rule and reign – expands and grows in the world.

The Gospel has indeed gone around the world and Satan has been unable to stop that from happening.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds describes how God’s rule and reign are concurrent with the work of the Enemy. Ultimately, only God’s kingdom remains and the Enemy’s work is destroyed. The parable of the net also describes good and bad fish concurrently together with the separation of those accepting the Kingship of God from those who follow the Enemy occurring only at the end of the age.

Finally, the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl describe a person who is seriously intent on entering the Kingdom. The parables are not about buying your way into God’s goodness – that is impossible. You cannot buy your way into heaven. The parables are not about money; they are about the personal sacrifice of the man who gives up everything to seek God’s rule and reign. Something that is so important that it will occupy his full attention as the prize – the treasure and the pearl – is worth it.

Jesus commands us to, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” The challenge for us as we read these parables is to look inwardly to our hearts and ask; what are we seeking? Are we seeking the fleeting joys of this world or are we truly desiring the rule and reign of God in our lives and families?

ACNA Readings

1 Kings 3:3-14. This is the account of Solomon’s prayer for wisdom after he had secured the throne. David had accumulated eight wives and ten concubines during his reign. Solomon is the son of David’s last and final wife, Bathsheba. This reveals something of God’s character as one might naturally assume the mantle of kingship to fall to the firstborn from the first wife. David had acquired 17 legal wives and concubines and any of these could have produced the Messiah.

Yet, God chose to bring forth the redeemer from the wife in which everything had gone wrong. There was murder, betrayal, adultery, and lies. Just about every commandment had been broken. And yet when everything is wrong, the Lord comes along and makes everything right. This is very much his character and also in line with God’s revelation to Rachel that the older would serve the younger.

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The young Solomon has some of David's good characteristics in that he loves God – which is demonstrated by his worship and obedience to the Lord. However, Solomon appears to avoid the tent of David containing the Ark of the Covenant, and instead, he goes to Gibeon to worship with an extravagant sacrifice. Gibeon was a levitical city, formally a Canaanite stronghold held by the Hivites, to the north of Jerusalem in the hill territory of Benjamin. Subsequent to the conquest of Canaan, the Israelites probably located their own altars close to previous Canaanite worship areas. This was acceptable as long as Israel adhered to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 16:21 not to allow those sites to become corrupted by idolatry.

During the night the king has a dream encounter with the Lord in which he asks for a *discerning heart* or literally a לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ – a heart that hears. The phrase indicates the ability to listen patiently to all sides of an issue in order to come to a true and wise decision. Perhaps a heart that hears is the best definition of what wisdom truly is.

Psalm 119:121-136. These verses constitute the אַיִן Ayin and פֶּה Peh sections of this acrostic psalm. The psalmist seeks for the Lord to act on his behalf according to God's steadfast love. The writer urges God to act because **one**: he has done what is right and just according to the Torah and **two**: transgressors have broken God's law. Now, I don't think that the author is claiming any sort of sinless nature here; rather he knows that his heart and intention has always been to follow the Lord, regardless of whether he actually did so or not.

The psalmist proclaims the Word of God to be what he seeks, not the material desires of fine gold or wealth. This sentiment should be something we all aspire to have. This is not to say that becoming highly educated is wrong, nor owning and operating a successful business is evil, only that this should not be the highest of our priorities. Instead, the will of God is first and foremost the central concern of our lives. God's Word is true and so the psalmist will guard it deep within his soul.

We know the Bible to be true – at least that is what most of us say we believe. But do we really treasure the Scriptures like the author of this psalm does? Throughout Psalm 119, the writer proclaims a high adoration of the Scriptures. The Word of God always guides his thoughts, his movements, and his actions in the world. That does not make him perfect but it certainly guides him in the right direction.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.