

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander

St. Dunstan's, Bethesda

Proper 10 (A) - 12 July 2026

Genesis 25:19-24

Psalm 119:105-112

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

If you've been around St. Dunstan's for a while, then you likely have heard this rant before. Sorry, not sorry. Because – frankly – I think this is one of the fundamental problems besetting our culture, and I am on a mission to call it out whenever I hear it. So I ask you to bear with me, please...

I'm referring to our tendency to talk about "using" people. You know what I mean, I'm sure: *Whom do you use to clean your house, or do your taxes, or cut your grass?*

It sounds innocuous enough; it's a common enough expression, after all. I've probably heard it hundreds of times, and I've likely said it before myself. And that's the problem. Because language matters. Language reveals reality. And in our society the reality is that it seems perfectly acceptable to speak of "using" people to fulfill our own needs – particularly those tasks that we cannot (or choose not to) do for ourselves.

As recently as a few weeks ago, another Rector in this Diocese reached out to me to ask if I would be *using* both of our seminarians this summer, or would I mind loaning one out to this priest's parish.

Loaning one out – like a lawnmower.

I kid you not.

You'll be proud of me: for the sake of collegiality, I didn't say anything. But it took a lot not to launch into a lecture about using *things*, not people.

I really am capable of restraint...sometimes.

Nevertheless, it's worth checking ourselves – and the way we regard other human beings – from time-to-time.

We need to ask whether we see the person across from us as an equal, as precious to God as we are ourselves, or as means to an end.

And, if we're being truly honest, we need to consider whether our view is impacted by the other person's race, or ethnicity, or age, or gender, or ability, or profession, etc., etc., etc.

In other words, do we treat each other *instrumentally*, or *transactionally*, or with respect, dignity, and – dare I say – love?

This morning's lesson from Genesis offers a rather egregious example to demonstrate my point. If you ever think that Scripture is out of touch, or doesn't have anything to say to us today, I encourage you to re-read some of these accounts about our spiritual forebears. They hold up a mirror to our very flawed, very human, nature.

Today we hear about Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons, Esau and Jacob, brothers who wrestle and contend with each other pretty much from conception on throughout their lives. We'll hear more about them in the coming weeks. It's quite a saga.

In today's installment, Jacob, the slightly younger twin, is cooking a stew, and his brother walks in from working in the field, starving. Now, let's pause to picture the scene here: Jacob isn't microwaving an individual Cup o' Noodles for himself that his brother demands him to share. In the ancient world, one cooked for the entire household, so it would be reasonable for Esau to expect a portion of stew.¹

But Jacob, rather than simply handing his brother something to eat – something that he prepared expressly for this purpose – capitalizes on the moment for his own gain.

And Esau, motivated by appetite and need, goes along.

There it is: a transaction. Using another person.

What can you do for me? What do I get, in return?

I encourage you to spend some time this week reflecting on how many of your relationships are like this. In which situations are you Jacob? And in which might you be Esau?

And do you think this really is what God intends for us?

This doesn't always happen, but this week the Gospel seems to be set up to answer this question directly.

¹ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper10a>

The parable we've just heard – sometimes called the Parable of the Sower, or the Parable of the Soils – is likely familiar to many of us. It's another one of those stories that lends itself easily to children's ministry, and – in fact – we have acted it out in Vacation Bible School before.

"Listen!" Jesus begins. Think of those "Once upon a time" bedtime stories we used to hear as kids; this is our cue to settle in and open our imaginations to a world about to unfold.

"A sower went out to sow," Jesus continues. And as he sowed, the seed was scattered broadly, wildly, without a whole lot of regard for where it might wind up. Hither and yon, the seed went flying – some on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some, of course, on good soil.

But wait! Jesus goes on. It turns out that some seeds never took root at all, while some sprang up quickly, only to wither in the sun. Still other seeds were choked out by thorns. Only the seeds on the "good soil" were able to thrive and bear fruit.

Unlike some parables that are more difficult to understand, this one seems pretty clear. In fact, this is one of the few places in the Gospels where Jesus actually gives the disciples the answer key. *This is what this means*, He says. *Let anyone with ears listen!* Or, in a lesser-known paraphrase: *If you can't understand this, guys, then you don't have the good sense that God gave a goose!*

But do we *really* understand?

I suspect that we might listen to this story and immediately try to locate ourselves on the path, or the rocky ground, or among the thorns, or on good soil. And how many of us find ourselves in that last category?

I mean, we're here today, aren't we? Unlike those other seeds, who come to Church sometimes but who take the summer off. Or who used to come but haven't been back in a long time. Or who have never come to Church at all.

Come on, admit it: We all pat ourselves on the back sometimes.

If we think this parable is about *us*, then it becomes a morality tale. We are supposed to make sure that we land on good soil, so that we will bear fruit. The whole point is to *produce*...right?

Maybe. But then again, maybe not.

Because here's the thing: It turns out that this parable isn't about us, at all. As Jesus makes clear, this parable is about the *sower*, not the seed or the soil. He begins, "A sower went out to sow..." The sower is the main character of the story.

What difference does that make?

Well, if the parable is about the sower, then we are meant to watch what the sower does. And what is that? He casts seed with abandon, abundantly – some might even say wastefully, *prodigally*.

The sower can't possibly expect that every seed will take root; in fact, he knows that most won't. Nevertheless, he continues sowing persistently, broadly, wildly. He casts the seed lavishly, without regard for where it might wind up.

Not every seed is going to produce for the sower.

This isn't a transactional gesture.

It isn't instrumental.

It's generous.

It's extravagant.

This parable has a lot to say about how God operates.

Because yes, some of the seed will sprout up and bear fruit, which is great.

But most of it won't – about 75%, as a matter of fact. And that's okay.

After all, the birds need to eat, too.

Imagine God, constantly reaching out to you, persistently inviting you, always welcoming you – and everyone else.

Knowing full well that not everyone will respond.

Some treat God with scorn.

Some refuse to believe.

Some want to bear fruit but become distracted by the cares of the world and wither away.

They are no less precious in God's sight. *They are no less precious in God's sight.*

So what might all of this have to say to us?

It is an invitation to keep trying.

Keep loving.

Keep inviting.

Not with the expectation of receiving something in return (we don't *use* people, after all...), but with the prodigal, wasteful heart of our abundant, extravagant God.

We are called to welcome others to the Table – not so that they can become members of St. Dunstan's, or make large donations, or serve on a Committee.

But, in the words of the late Rachel Held Evans, quoted on the inside cover of your bulletin, "because they are hungry."

This is what God's kingdom is like.

We are called to care for and serve others – not because they "deserve" it, necessarily, and not so they can care for and serve us, in return – but because they are children of God.

We are people, not lawnmowers.

That's the great Good News, my friends: God loves us for who we are, not for what we can do, and we are only asked to do likewise.

May it be so.

Amen.