

## *Surely God is in this place!*

*Genesis 28: 10-19; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

God's active presence blows through all people and things. In prayer we can center and listen for that energy as it heals and inspires; however, prayer also slows us down, reminds us to not rush to judgment or change for change's sake. Jesus uses weeds and wheat to teach that the faith journeys of individuals and church community is to be tended carefully and never rushed. Jacob's ladder is another helpful metaphor to remind us to go only one rung at a time. How shall we slow to the speed of God's guidance this week, this month?

The parable of the wheat and the weeds can only be found in the Gospel of Matthew. Often, we see parallel teachings in the other gospels but not this one. Matthew is famous for using the image of a seed as a key metaphor and understanding God's Kingdom. In this parable today we are not focusing on where the seed lands like we did last week with the parable of the sower. Instead we're focusing on the kind of seeds that are planted. In this parable the seeds that are planted represent both the disciples of God and the disciples of the evil one. The issue is that the enemy has sown disciples of evil in the community of faith. When the workers went to the householder, they wondered what happened. Had the owner actually used good seed? Where had the weeds come from? And did the owner want them to get rid of the weeds, to pull them?

Now as is customary with Jesus teaching, he shares a parable with the disciples and as usual the disciples didn't really get it at first. Parables invite us to look at things in a new way. This parable goes against our instincts. Well it goes against our instinct, which is to rid the ground of weeds immediately and instead we are asked to wait; to wait patiently and slow down, until the good seeds are ready to be harvested. Now any good gardener out there would know that ridding the harvest of weeds would be logical because the roots of the weeds take up valuable space in the soil. They take away much needed nutrients and often grow so fast that they can over shadow the harvest and block out the sun. After contemplating what would be the best course of action, the sower concluded that the weeds must stay for now, for they have the potential to do a lot of damage if they are pulled prematurely. When gathering the weeds immediately you could uproot the wheat along with them thus, we have no choice but to wait. The weeds will have to be pulled once it's time to harvest, and then when the field has been harvested the workers would have to go through and separate the weeds out, bundle the weeds up, and then burn them.

One biblical scholar named David Waugh helped to contextualize this parable in Matthew's gospel and he writes this:

“Addressing a growing concern within the young Christian community following the fall of Jerusalem, Matthew pairs the parable of the sower with the parable of the weeds. In the parable of the sower Jesus addresses the question of why responses to the gospel vary so greatly and so often seem unproductive. In the parable of the weed’s attention shifts from an external force to an internal focus. From the Christian community's formative days as a small band gathered around their sage to the present era it has wrestled with the paradoxical nature of the church and the contradictory forces at work within it.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes this is hard to hear and that's why the last invitation is to truly listen to what the parable says to us this day. What Matthew has identified is the fact that there is and always will be antagonists in the church. They have been described as weeds, sometimes wolves, false prophets. There are many different images used to talk about people that are antagonists the people that maybe get us to question what our mission and ministry is, the people that might lead us on a path that does not lead towards the Kingdom of God. What we need to remember is that we're not here to judge, that's not our place and even more importantly we need to be cautious to rushing to judgment. So are we told this parable because the weeds have potential that only God sees, or is this a universal truth that you have to take the good with the bad, or maybe this is simply an honest reflection of who we are as humans. We as humans have the capacity to do harm and to do good. The pairing of this parable with the story of Jacob reminds us that Jacob isn't unique in his struggle to resist evil and we can't simply take a person and pull out all the bad seeds in them. And there is good news in all of this so please don't start feeling guilty and focusing on how you are a weed. That is not the point of the scripture today. The good news is this what we are promised is that God will always be with us. We are being asked to trust that God will transform us. Both Jacob and weeds can be and will be transformed. We can also place our trust in God who has a deep knowledge of the potential that both Jacob and the field can yield. God is asking us to be patient with ourselves and with others for it is God who sees our potential often before we even do. I think the story of Jacob is a perfect example of how God looks beyond what most people see and finds the potential within that individual.

Jacob is a fun character and I want to give you a bit of the back story for those of you who don't know. Jacob was a twin and his twin brothers name was Esau now before we get to the passage that we heard today what happened was this. Jacob was the slightly younger one of the two and liked to spend most of his time in tents and he was a very skilled cook, chef in fact. Whereas Esau was a strong hunter who loved the outdoors and because he was first born technically, he was destined to inherit all that was due to the first-born son as was the tradition back then. Jacob was not happy about this and upon Esau’s return one day from hunting Jacob devised a plan, a plan to change his lot in life he saw an opportunity and he took it. Jacob seeing the hunger in

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<sup>1</sup> David Waugh, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 261.

Esau's eyes after a hard day's work out hunting, convinces Esau to give up his birthright for a bowl of stew. As readers of this story we are left with the conclusion that Jacob is a schemer, a dirty rotten scoundrel of person who took advantage of his brother's weakness for his own personal gain. So why would God in the next chapters provide Jacob who had cheated Esau out of his birthright provide him with a dream of angels going up and down a ladder? Why would God then promise to give Jacob the land on which he was sleeping? There is no way that Jacob could have Earned this opportunity or deserve such an opportunity really, but God doesn't stop. God believes in the transforming power, that there is good in each one of us. God provides Jacob with words of comfort and God says some of the most comforting words in the Bible. God says, *"know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go those are beautiful comforting words especially in times when we are isolated from one another and feeling like we're missing out on our support circles. How could Jacob in that moment not be changed how could he not be changed after hearing such words of comfort?

Now understandably Jacob awoke feeling afraid for he knew that God was in this very place where he had laid his head that night. He was so moved by this experience that he took a rock upon which he had laid his head and place that rock upon a pillar and poured oil over it anointing it and then calling this place Bethel, the House of God. Such experiences of God are hard to put into words. So many people would understand this in a moment in which one's heart is suddenly opened it's that moment when you suddenly realize that you are truly loved by someone and yet when you go to tell other people your words just don't capture that moment clearly. I kind of equate this moment for Jacob these moments in our own lives where suddenly we just feel the love of God and we're bursting out into the world. I equate it to the moments in the story of the Grinch who stole Christmas who in the end of the story had his heart grow three times larger. The Grinch was transformed from a curmudgeon, a stingy person into a person whose spirit of generosity and love was overflowing. The same thing happened to Jacob here. He was out for himself when suddenly God opened his heart and things changed. Jacob changed. He saw that God was right there right there with him he didn't need to fight for stuff, but God was right there. What would happen if Jacob and the Grinch were planted as weeds in the garden, in God's garden? Would we pull them out never to have been given the opportunity to be transformed? Would we judge them as nasty and life sucking? What leads up to this moment for Jacob?

I mean one can imagine how frightening it would be for Jacob to be out in the wilderness all alone, afraid, not skilled like his brother Esau was. Jacob was wandering in this wilderness probably filled with anxiety, unsure of what was next, no longer in a space of comfort with his mother and father protecting him and providing for him. This time in the wilderness was probably an opportunity for Jacob to slow down and to reflect; to reflect on what he had done, the tricks he played, and what he should truly value. And after awakening from his dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending Jacob awakes and is struck by the fact that God is

there in this place and he didn't even know it. He thought he was all alone and yet the whole time God was there with him. This place was truly the House of God. Jacob felt God's presence probably for the first time and in that moment of discovery after waiting Jacob makes a vow to accept God's promises and to be faithful to God through his suffering and fear; he's come to know a greater power than himself.

Now I think it's safe to say that every one of us at some point in our life was felt unworthy of God's love and protection. Maybe we felt God wasn't there and had abandoned us. I think it's safe to say to that each of us is both wheat and weeds, both holy and unholy, potentially fruitful, and potentially destructive. For some of us this feeling is brought on by the knowledge that maybe we haven't prayed enough, maybe we haven't done enough on a regular basis for others. This might be the result of some bad choices. The good news today is that there is hope and redemption for all of us. We know this because God has power to transform each and everyone of us. God knows each of us intimately. When we think back to the song that we use for our prayer confession we know that God knows our going in and going out, God knows us through and through. We do need to take responsibility for our actions we need to ask for forgiveness and we need to trust and know that the grace and love of God will be freely given to us that we can and will be transformed, but there's time to pause and reflect. We truly can be the children of God and we will be nurtured and grow strong and provide compassion and love for all people that we meet in this world.

So, I hope as we leave this time of worship and enter another week that we will all take time to reflect pause and to notice that God is with us. God's love can direct us, transform us, and make this world a place where all are respected and loved. So, I hope you go out into this world with the peace and love of God knowing that you are a precious seed that has been planted and that you too will become wheat. Go into this world and spread that love with everyone thanks be to God.