

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43  
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I'm sure when you heard the reading from Genesis you immediately starting singing that familiar Negro spiritual, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder. Every rung goes higher, higher." I thought about singing it this morning, but decided the actual words to the song didn't help us understand this story from Genesis.

Jacob has just conspired with his mother, Rebekah, to fool old, blind Isaac into giving him the father's blessing as the oldest son, which is actually Esau. Jacob pretended to be Esau by putting a pelt of fur on his arm so when Isaac touched him he felt more hairy like Esau was. Isaac, never expecting a trick, fell for it. But when Esau came in a little later for the blessing he was entitled to and found out he had been cheated by his younger, twin brother, he vowed to kill Jacob.

As we pick up the ongoing drama this morning, Jacob is getting out of Dodge in anticipation of Esau's wrath and heading to his Uncle Laban's home in Haran. Up 'til now Jacob hasn't had much need for God and certainly hasn't acted in a God-fearing or honorable way. With a remarkable dream of a ladder with angels ascending and descending from heaven to earth, his transformation begins. Additionally, while Jacob sleeps, the God of Abraham and Isaac once again promises that through his offspring and in the surrounding land all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

If Jacob went to sleep tired and afraid, he wakes in astonishment and wonder knowing that God is with him and near him in spite of his deceitful behavior. The ladder was a unique symbol of the nearness of earth and heaven in that place – what some have described as a "thin place," where there seems to be little distinction, little separation between the secular and the sacred.

Unfortunately, we've used the image of the ladder in our culture to describe success or failure, those higher up being better off than those on the rungs lower down. We want to climb the ladder of power, wealth and privilege.

In Genesis, the ladder is used to show a place where heaven descends to earth. Our faith is of such a ladder as this. We believe that, in Jesus, God came down; he descended to take up residence with us. In Jesus, love is a movement downward to seek those at the bottom rather than a race to the top to distance ourselves from the lower classes. Henri Nouwen was the first Christian writer I came across to suggest that Christians

should practice what he called “downward mobility.” He didn’t mean that we necessarily choose poverty as he and other monastics have done, but that we live more simply and use more of our resources for the benefit of those with the least. Many of you do just that. I think I told you about the young man who became a stock broker so he could attain as much money as possible solely to give away to the poor.

Keeping with the ladder concept of going up and down, without using the actual imagery, the Psalmist contributes to this understanding of a God who doesn’t stay put above the fray. In Psalm 139, the Spirit of God goes where he or she goes.

*Where can I go then from your Spirit. Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also.*

Even when the Psalmist is in trouble, described by being covered in darkness or having one’s light turned to night, even then, God is no less present.

*Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.*

Jacob took the rock he had used as a pillow, poured oil on it and marked the spot where he had encountered the God of his fathers in the ladder dream. He called that place Bethel – Beth meaning “house” in Hebrew, and El meaning “God,” short for Elohim. The Psalmist might describe any place he is as Beth El or the place where God remains present. As the baptized, we too know ourselves as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. We are “Bethel” – the house of God – and where we are, there God is also. We are never forsaken or left desolate.

Of course, we don’t always act like the house of God even though we do have the Holy Spirit within us. In a dream last night, a dog rushed by me intending, I thought, to rip off a piece of my leg or worse. Fortunately, I had a push broom in my hands to ward it off, but some awful words came out of my mouth. Juanita was awakened but didn’t hear anything more than a cry. If a car comes too close on the road when I am riding my bike, I’m tempted to shake my fist and usually say something nasty under my breath. It’s just a reflex response. It’s inside me just under the surface. I’m not proud of it.

In this morning’s parable of the wheat and the weeds, Jesus tells us something we already know too well. The world is a mixed bag, full of good and evil. As much as God is the source of all that is good, holy and beautiful, other forces are spreading discord, hatred and corruption. Some scholars think that the author of Matthew’s gospel has taken an original parable of Jesus and used it to describe the early church, maybe even the one the author attends and is writing for. Are we here at Christ and Grace like a field

with wheat and weeds growing together? Who are the weeds and which of us are the wheat?

I suspect each of us might disagree about the answer to that question. For some I might be considered wheat while for others I'm weed. Therein lies the problem Jesus is addressing. None of us is holy enough or unbiased enough to separate the wheat from the weeds. If we think we are, it may be an indication that we are more weed-like than we think. The final sorting is for God to do at the end of time.

I hope you noticed that Jesus said "all causes of sin and evil doers" would be burned at the last. He didn't say run-of-the mill sinners like you and me. We may all get a little singed, however.

In the meantime, we are to refrain from judging others and instead work to improve ourselves. We can best do that by encouraging and complimenting everything we think is good in the people around us.

For example, one evening when we were in Maine, my brothers and I stopped at a little ice cream stand for a sweet dessert. The young college-age girl serving us was most personable and polite. To my surprise, my older brother said to this perfect stranger, "You are very good at this. You should go into the business." She replied that she was, in fact, majoring in "Hospitality Management."

My brother wasn't afraid to compliment and confirm a strength he recognized, even in a complete stranger.

If God is indeed with us, and every place is Bethel, there is plenty of good to see, make known and do. AMEN.