

Proper 11A
Genesis 28:10-19a
Matthew 13:24-30
July 23, 2023
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Dallas Willard was a long-time professor of philosophy at USC in Los Angeles. He was very young when his mother died. Willard wrote that he was especially sad and lonely at night, so he would go into his dad's room and ask if he could sleep with him. But even then he couldn't rest until he not only knew his dad was with him but that his face was turned toward him.

In the darkness he would say, "Daddy, is your face turned toward me now?" His father would say, "Yes, I'm here and my face is turned toward you." Then the little guy could rest and sleep.

I'm convinced that deep down we all want to live with God's face turned toward us. We want to experience the reality that Moses prayed for: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you."

Who do you suppose are the kind of people who know God like that? Saints, mystics, the devoted and wise; the solid, honest, hard-working citizen. Scripture tells us it's not just them. God also comes to people who are chronically dissatisfied – restless people - demanding, high-maintenance people; whiners and complainers, those who are impossible to please. As surprising as it may seem, God also comes to people who are deceptive and double-minded – just consider the life of Jacob.

He was no spiritual giant and his dad never cared too much for him because he was so different from his dad – Jacob liked to hang around indoors, listen to music and read, while his dad was an outdoorsman; so he favored his older son Esau, who, though he wasn't the brightest bulb in the chandelier, he was also an outdoorsman like his dad. So Esau was Dad's favorite.

This morning's lesson from the Hebrew Bible picks up when Jacob is running away from home because he had deceived his father and tricked his brother out of their father's inheritance. So Jacob stops for the night at "a certain place". That's a Hebrew way of saying no place in particular – could have been little tiny Como (between Albany and Portland; or Windsor, just south of Parker City, or maybe even the someplace along the Cunningham Ditch, which empties into the Prairie Creek Reservoir. It could have been anywhere – some spot by the side of the road with nothing special about it – Jacob stopped at this non-descript "certain place".

Jacob had done nothing to merit what was about to happen – he had been a co-dependent participant in his mother's scheme – he had been a jealous rival to his brother, and a brazen liar to his father. But there, in that "certain place", Jacob had a dream: he saw a ladder "resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were

ascending and descending on it.” God said to him: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac ... I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...”

When Jacob awoke from sleep he thought to himself, “Surely God is in this place and I was not aware of it.... This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” Pay close attention to that statement because it’s an essential key to life for us: “Surely God is in this place and I was not aware of it ... this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

I realize that you and I don’t know one another very well and I hope not to offend you; but I’m still going to ask you a rather personal question: What place are you in today?

- A place of relative peace/satisfaction – you’re comfortable in your retirement; or if you’re still working, you like your job and your co-workers, or perhaps it feels like swimming with sharks; maybe you’re just bored with it.
- Place of accomplishment or failure – a season of growing in your faith or feeling stale?
- Place of sorrow – place of fear about the future – place of shame over something in your past?
- Place a place of bitterness or resentment over some injustice?

There’s an old hymn that goes, “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder ...every round goes higher, higher” But the song gets the story wrong. It’s not a ladder for us to climb up – it’s a ladder for God to come down, all the way down to where we live, all the way down to the place where we are – whatever place in which we find ourselves. What “place” are you in this morning?

This this hospital room, this detour, this transition, this job change, this downsizing, this waiting on a biopsy, this this I hope you are able to hear with me that whatever place you are in can become Bethel – the house of God, the gate of heaven – wherever you are ... whenever that is

Actually this is when Jacob’s life starts to change – it doesn’t happen all at once. God’s presence doesn’t mean, “poof” he’s exempt from problems or his own character flaws; but his journey has begun – just read a couple of verses further where we hear Jacob say in vss. 20-21, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,”

At first glance that sounds pretty transactional doesn’t it – “If God will do this for me then I’ll do this for him”. But here’s the way I read that: ***If God will do these things for the likes of me, after all that I’ve done and all the ways I’ve hurt others, then how can I not give my life and my devotion to a God like this?!***

Then, based on that profound conversion, Jacob eventually he decides to take on the enormous risk of reconciling with his brother, Esau. Instead of ripping him off he decides to give

back to him – he sends him these extravagant gifts. (It’s somewhat similar to how Zacchaeus responded when he encountered God in Jesus Christ – remember how he responded to Jesus: “from now on, half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I’ve defrauded anyone I’ll pay them back four times over!”)

After a whole childhood of living as enemies and 20 years as living as rival strangers, now they are brothers. Jacob makes one of the greatest statements in all of Scripture: “To see your face is like seeing the face of God...” **Once we meet God at Bethel – once we see God in an ordinary, unexpected moment ... in your cubical or while you are alone rocking your grandbaby – once we see God in that “certain place”, we never know where God will show up next - even in the face of someone you’ve been estranged from for 20 years....**

Maybe this is why our lectionary has paired this story with Jesus’ parable of the Weeds growing in amongst the wheat? Could it be that Jacob the trickster, Jacob the shyster, Jacob the deceiver, who is also Jacob the guardian and protector of the Covenant, is a flesh and blood illustration for us of good wheat that has been invaded by some weeds?

Some scholars believe the weed described in the parable is something called “bearded darnel”. This noxious weed’s roots surround the roots of good plants, making it virtually impossible to root out without damaging the good crop. But above ground, the darnel looks almost identical to wheat. Only when it bears seed can you tell what is wheat and what is bearded darnel. So it seems there is more ambiguity between the weeds and the wheat than we may realize.

Like the servants, who see the weeds and want to pull them up, we too would really like to get rid of some things we see in people who are different from us:

- a theology that doesn’t fit with our own enlightened understandings,
- the hypocrisy of people those who claim to be followers of Jesus while claiming freedom of religion to justify their exclusion of others;
- Often, we are inclined to focus our energy on narrowing the circle to ensure that the only people representing God and the church have passed the proper litmus test for virtually every ethical question.

Augustine spoke of the church as the *corpus permixtum*, a mixed body of believers. So here in the mixed body of the church and in our world, where wheat and weeds grow together in the same field, it is tempting to spend our time identifying and removing the weeds. But the trouble with this is that we risk harming the good things growing in our midst. And we risk becoming so distracted by the weeds that we forget to live out the goodness God has created and calls us toward right here and right now.

So I wonder if this parable shifts our attention away from our attempts to judge what is “good” and what is “evil,” and instead invites us to simply focus our energy on the good and crucial Work of Love?

If you hate weeding your own flower beds and garden, then you might take this as good news. But more than that, if you're overwhelmed by all that is happening in our world, I believe this is good news for how we can live as people of faith in anxious times.

Actually, the only thing we have much control over is where we will focus our attention. So rather than focusing on plucking out what we believe is questionable – whether its certain books from our libraries – or pushing out a gay elementary school teacher - what if we simply put our energy into being good, healthy, nourishing wheat?

Are you open to hearing a Word from God this morning? As followers of Jesus our calling is not to seek out and purge sin and evil—God will tend to that. Our calling is to embody this radical grace of God in Christ in our everyday living, to love deeply when love is hardest to come by, to give ourselves as partners with God to accomplish what to others may seem foolish or impossible.

Or, paraphrasing Jacob: *If God will turn his face toward the likes of even me, with all my weedy patches, then how can I not give my life and devotion to a God like that?*