

Genesis 28:10-19a
Matthew 13:24-30

GETTING IN GOD'S WAY

I started last week's sermon with a story about an elevator ride I once shared with my Uncle Barry and numerous others. This week's sermon also begins with an elevator story although – please pardon the pun – I doubt that you will find it “uplifting!” John D. Rockefeller, who was a U. S. industrialist and philanthropist, use to hold important negotiations with business leaders in his high-rise office building. After the meetings, he walked his visitors out to the hallway and then said goodbye to them at the elevator. While the visitors stepped into the elevator, an innocent looking man would slip in and ride with them to the ground floor. He would follow the group out the door and then cross the street. A few minutes later, the innocent looking man would go back to Rockefeller's office to deliver a detailed report concerning what the unsuspecting visitors had talked about during their ride in the elevator. (“Lies and Deceptions in Selling, Gerhard Gschwandtner, Personal Selling Power, May/June 1992, p. 63)

John D. Rockefeller undoubtedly would have liked the Old Testament character, Jacob – and what a character he was! He too was shrewd and conniving. We met up with Jacob last week as he talked his older brother, Esau, out of his birthright in exchange for some bread and lentil soup. In between that episode and the lesson for today, Jacob (aided by his mother, Rebekah) hoodwinked his old, nearly blind father, Isaac, and stole the blessing that was meant for Esau. The birthright was no longer Esau's, and the blessing intended for Esau but pronounced over Jacob, who was disguised in sheep's clothing, was an irrevocable blessing. Naturally, Esau was angry and he was out for revenge; in fact, he vowed to murder Jacob.

In today's passage, Jacob was running for his life. He traveled far and long. He dropped exhausted to the ground and, using a stone for a pillow, he immediately fell asleep. In time, he dreamed of a ladder, which was really more of a ramp or stairs that stretched from the earth to heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending, which is to say these divine messengers were not only carrying messages or prayers from earth to heaven, but also bringing the Word of God from heaven to earth.

Far more important than the angels, of course, was the Lord God, who stood by and revealed himself to Jacob. Yahweh reaffirmed to Jacob the same covenant promise that had been given to his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. Now, Jacob received the promise and blessing, which included the very land he was traveling through along with many offspring; and Jacob and his descendants would bless all the families of the earth. Furthermore, there was the divine assurance: “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.” Jacob woke from his sleep and quickly realized that “the Lord is in this place” and that “this is the gate of heaven.” Therefore, Jacob set up an altar, poured oil on the top of it, and consecrated that special place by naming it Bethel, the house or dwelling place of God.

Up until this time in the biblical narrative, God was the God of Jacob's ancestors. But now, God was Jacob's God as well. Whereas Jacob wasn't really looking for God when he ran away, nevertheless, God was actively seeking Jacob. And, while Jacob could hide from his brother Esau, he could not hide from God. This we know: God is faithful to God's promises. Here's one thing God cannot do; God is not going to let the covenant go unfulfilled. We know the good news that through Jesus the Christ (descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) all the families of earth are blessed. Whereas Jacob dreamed of a ladder from earth to heaven and back again, with angels coming and going, we live in the glorious reality that, instead of a ladder, a cross was raised between heaven and earth, connecting the two; instead of angels, the very Son of God became the means through whom we have access to God the Father. Therefore, as the Letter to the Hebrews says so beautifully: “Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Speaking of Jesus, I am reminded of the Gospel lesson for today. Our Lord told, this story, which we know as the parable of the weeds among the wheat. Someone sowed good seed in a field. However, while everyone was sleeping, an enemy sowed weeds among the wheat. When both wheat and weeds came up, the slaves wanted to get rid of the weeds. But, the master told them to let the weeds alone, let the weeds grow alongside the wheat; otherwise, the wheat might be uprooted with the weeds. Instead, they should wait until harvest time; then, and only then, the weeds would be separated and destroyed while the wheat would be stored in the barns.

Certainly, the point is to be patient and do not rush into judging others – lest we are wrong, and we become “weed-like” in our haughty judgment of others. Don’t be overzealous in eradicating evil, or we will end up doing more harm than good.

John Claypool told the story of a friend who was in the company of American soldiers that first reached the concentration camp called Dachau and liberated it from the Germans. Although there had been rumors of the atrocities that had taken place there, none of the Americans were prepared for the shock that came to their spirits when they saw the kinds of inhumanity that had been perpetuated there against the Jewish people. The few German soldiers that were left meekly surrendered. A contingency of American soldiers was given the task of taking them to an Allied prison camp. Claypool’s friend said that no sooner had they gotten out of sight, that they heard a round of machine gun fire, and a few minutes later the American soldiers returned with smirks on their faces saying, “We had no choice. They tried to escape and we had to mow them down.” The friend told Claypool that it dawned on him that the inhumanity of the Germans to the Jews had driven his colleagues to do the same back to them, which meant that the cancer of inhumanity was now increased, not diminished. The attempt to isolate evil and to do to it what it has done to others will only lead to an enlargement of evil. (Biblical Preaching Journal, Summer 1993, p. 11)

As Jesus recommended, we are better off if we stay out of the business of judging others or we too may be guilty of the same sins as those persons we point our finger at and cluck our tongues! Jesus’ parable also reminds us that, so very often, weeds grow among the good seeds of our soul. We are this crazy mixture of good and evil all rolled into one. Like the Apostle Paul, we realize that we too do not do what we want, but the very thing we hate; we can will what is right, but we cannot do it. Like the weeds vying with the wheat, we are at war (or, at least, tug of war) within ourselves, good versus evil; and, we get in the way of God’s plan for our lives and the life of the world.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, who has conquered sin. Although weeds persist in our lives, by the grace of God, Christ Jesus continues to mow them down and, by the Holy Spirit, bring our lives under control. In Jesus’ parable, the master told the others to wait until both weeds and wheat reach maturity. “To wait” doesn’t mean to remain passive and uninvolved in the events of history. Rather, the biblical sense of waiting means to actively return good for evil. We are to do precisely what Jesus did on the cross, when he was provoked in every way to imitate evil. He was spat on, ridiculed, brutalized. Yet he did not become a beast in the face of all that bestiality. He remained humane in that sea of inhumanity. (Ibid.)

When we strive to return good for evil, to spread the good seed in our lives and restrain the bad seed, then we put ourselves in God’s way and we can be used by God to accomplish the holy purpose. Here, you will detect an echo from last week’s sermon. Once again, make no mistake about it, Jacob, and you and me, can be real scoundrels at times! In all of us there is a mixture of good and bad seeds, wheat and weeds.

While Jacob was a long way from being what he would be someday, he had met God; God had encountered him, and so Jacob was on the way to being used by God to fulfill God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Yes, he was a trickster who deceived his father, and a swindler who cheated Esau out of what was lawfully his. But God still loved Jacob and had a plan for him. Through the grace of God something good would eventually come out of Jacob. This defrauder was heading for a transformation. In fact, one day in the future even his name would be different. No longer Jacob, he would be called Israel and his offspring would bless the world.

And, if God were able to use Jacob to work out the divine purposes, then certainly God is able to use each of us, wheat and weeds though we are. In Jesus Christ, God can and does transform us, turn our lives around and use us in ways we never would have imagined. Our job as people of faith is to put ourselves in God’s way. We are called to get in God’s way, to make ourselves ready and available to be used by God wherever God needs us and sends us. We too have been transformed and given a new name – Christian, “little Christs!” Pray and strive to always live up to that name above all names.

Giuseppe’s Papa called him a “good-for-nothing.” Papa came from a long line of fishermen, and for Sicilian families, the sons were to follow in their father’s occupation. When he first came to America, Giuseppe’s father worked on the railroad until he saved enough money to send for his family. They moved to Fishermen’s Wharf in San Francisco so he could continue his family tradition – fishing. There were nine children in the family, and all the boys were expected to help in the fishing business. But Giuseppe didn’t want to; the rocking of the small boat and the smell of fish bothered him; he just could not adapt to the fishing business. So he took odd jobs with all of his earnings returned to the family for food

and clothing, but his father continued to call him lazy. Real work was helping his father on the fishing boat. Guiseppe was beginning to think he might never amount to anything. As it turned out, Guiseppe was quite successful. We know him by his American name, "Joe." We know him as "the Yankee Clipper," Joe DiMaggio. Joe, and two of his fishermen brothers, became very good baseball players. Joe is in baseball's Hall of Fame. God had found a way to work with this "good-for-nothing" boy of a Sicilian fisherman. (Lectionary Homiletics, July 2005, p. 56)

Despite our weeds and our warts, God finds ways to transform us, work with us, and use us in loving service to others. Let us get in God's way so that God's Spirit can melt us, mold us, fill us, and use us – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens
First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA
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