

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (July 23, 2017)

[RCL - Tract 1: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43]

Fr. Pat Young

"Stones, Wheat and Weeds"

Today's readings offer us a wonderful opportunity to focus on stories. The stories we tell both illuminate and teach the virtues that our communities respect. Stories transmit culture, values, and ethics. Stories often include images and actions that raise questions and confirm values. In our church communities, we tell concrete stories that illustrate our beliefs, rather than using abstract language to try to explain our theology. To continue the story from Fr. Morris' sermon last week, the book of Genesis contains the foundational stories of our faith, while the gospels contain both the story that Jesus lived and the stories that Jesus told his community of followers.

What does the story of Jacob's dream tell us about our faith? What does the parable of the weeds of the field tell us about what we value as a community? How do these two stories work together to paint a rich and nuanced picture of the ideals explicit and implicit in our stories?

Both stories contain angels!

We might define angels as spiritual beings who possess powers and intelligence superior to humans. Angels are intermediaries between heaven and earth, between God and God's people. They are God's messengers.

There is quite a lot going on in today's passage from Genesis, a rich source for questions. Jacob, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, has fled from his home, where he has just tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, deceiving his father in the process.

Journeying to the home of his mother's people, Jacob stops for the night and puts a stone under his head for a pillow. Why a stone for a pillow? The answer to that question is revealed later in the passage after Jacob wakes from his dream. Jacob takes the stone from under his head, sets it up as a pillar, and anoints it as a sacred place, which he calls Bethel, or "house of God."

Thus the stone signifies a sacred space, and sleeping on it induces Jacob's dream, his message from God.

The first thing that Jacob sees in his dream is a ladder from earth to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

The sacred nature of the site is confirmed, as it is the earthly place of connection to heaven. And what are those angels doing, going up and down?

Certainly, they indicate our connection with God, a connection that seems to go two ways. In the Greek and early rabbinic traditions, ladders are associated with judgment. We might explain it this way: God makes ladders. Some folks are raised up; some are brought down. In the words of Psalm 75, verse 7: "It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another."

Having recently used trickery and deceit to steal his brother's birthright, and fleeing from his brother's anger, Jacob might well wonder about God's judgment upon him. But God appears to him and repeats the covenant that God made with Abraham: the promises of land, descendants, and blessing.

God confirms the blessing that Isaac had previously given to Jacob. He is to be the new patriarch of God's people.

Further, and even more awesome, God assures Jacob that God is with him wherever he goes. At a vulnerable moment, fleeing from home, sleeping rough on the road to a foreign land, Jacob receives knowledge of God's divine presence and help. Jacob, a man on the run, is transformed by God's grace into a man who is blessed to be the new leader of God's people.

What has the story of Jacob's dream taught us about what we value?

- We value sacred spaces.
- We value our connection with God, and
- We acknowledge that fortune moves up and down, but God is always with us.

Implicit in the story of Jacob is the ever-present possibility of redemption. We are reminded that God's grace, like God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, is unconditional.

Let's look at the Gospel for today. What about the parable of weeds among the wheat? Jesus is quite specific about explaining what is happening in the story, but what are the implicit values transmitted to those who have ears to listen?

Jesus lived in an agrarian or agricultural society, so it isn't surprising that he used farming metaphors as concrete images to explain the mysterious nature of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is like someone who has sowed good seed, yet an enemy has come and sowed weeds among the wheat.

The kingdom of heaven is messy and complicated and will encounter opposition. In fact, evil exists in the world, and may not be easily rooted out. As the householder wisely advises his slaves, it is not a good idea to pull out the weeds, for their roots are entangled with the wheat and pulling them out will damage the crop.

Jesus explains that at the end of the age, the angelic reapers will collect the weeds and throw them into the fire, while the wheat will be gathered into God's kingdom.

We wonder, along with the slaves in the story, where these weeds came from. Why does God allow evil to grow in God's kingdom? What can we do about it?

Scholars tell us that the weeds in the parable are likely darnel, a weedy grass that looks like wheat until it matures.

While the plants in the field are young, the good wheat and the invasive weeds are indistinguishable and intertwined. Then the heads of the wheat droop over, while the heads of the weeds stand up straight.

The image is of humility and pride. Let me say that again...the image is of humility and pride! Is it up to the humble, true followers of Jesus to identify and destroy their proud, hypocritical neighbors? Is the destiny of wheat and weed fixed, or is there a possibility of redemption??

There is a difference between weeds and people! We might argue that weeds are weeds forever, while people, if not torn out by the roots, might be redeemed by God's grace. We cannot be certain who is good and who is evil.

In the parable, the householder says, "In gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest." He counsels patience and faith in God's justice. It is important not to damage the roots of the wheat.

A good steward must do what is best for all....even if the weeds will survive in the short term.

What does this narrative tell us about the values and culture of the storytellers?

- We acknowledge the presence of evil in the world,
- While evil may be redeemed, that redemption may not happen in this world,
- It is not our job to judge, and
- We believe in God's judgment at the last day.

Does Jesus' parable encourage passivity?

Are the children of God to wait for those end-of-time reapers, for God to take care of the weeds?

Or, is Jesus offering guidance on how to live in a complicated world?

While we wait for God to judge at the last day, how are we to live? Knowing that evil seed grows, that evil roots are allowed to flourish, how are we to live?

These two stories come together in our hearts and communities in the season of Pentecost, when we commemorate the beginnings of the Church. From Genesis grows our awareness of the sanctity of consecrated sacred space and the certainty of our eternal relationship with God.

Through the parable of the weeds among the wheat, Jesus reminds us that we live in a hostile world, that good and bad are intermingled, that we must live cooperatively for the good of all, and that we ought to leave judgment to God.

We are to live in awe, as Jacob did on that morning in Bethel, in the presence of a just God who meets us where we are, who is with us, and will keep us, wherever we go.

Let us close with a collect from the Book of Common Prayer...a prayer that might have been written by the householder in today's parable. Let us pray:

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.