

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

Ladder Day Saints

A sermon preached July 20, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder¹ set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And the LORD stood beside him¹ and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed¹ in you and in your offspring. 15 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." 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place -- and I did not know it!" 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." 18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel;

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' 28 He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." 37 He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38 the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42 and they will throw

*them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43
Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with
ears¹ listen!*

A young graduate has received her first job offer, exactly what she wants, in her field and with a new, aggressive company where there will be lots of room for advancement. The people she will be working with are the young geniuses of the industry, and she will be their colleague. On top of it all, the company is sending her to the Denver office. The mountains! Imagine her luck. Before she even finds an apartment, she buys skis.

Two months into the work, things begin to pale. The young geniuses are either sex maniacs or back-biters or both. It hardly snows in the mountains that year. The West proves to be a long, long way from home, and the subject matter she loved in college is terminally boring to work at. Something had gone south. Early on the world had seemed her oyster; now everything had started coming up clams.

Sweethearts in college, they continued dating as they began their careers. They liked the same movies, made each other laugh, and sweated together at the health club. It was a relationship made in heaven, or at least in one of heaven's nicer suburbs. They married, moved into her apartment, and bought a dog.

It was so deliciously romantic. But two weeks after the wedding ceremony they had their first fight. The second fight came along shortly thereafter concerning who had started the first one. Romance was taking some lumps. They had started out wildly in love; they had ended up merely married.

We know how things go. Flannery O'Connor once said her task as a novelist was to create "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Any of us in this room, by telling our life story, could provide her a wealth of toad profiles. The reddest apples can have worms in them. The prettiest dimple-cheeked child can grow up to be a terror. Paint peels, machinery wears out, lives become damaged, and loved ones sicken and die.

Our dreams collide with reality, the reality that friends and co-workers don't necessarily live up to our expectations nor we theirs, the reality that every marriage is a mixed marriage of two very different people, and the reality that time inevitably erodes our strengths, changes our perspective, and brings life to a close. This is not to say dreams never come true. It is to say that life is full of ambiguity, contingency, and accident. Good and evil live in the same neighborhoods; right and wrong are fraternal twins. Did we think we were always sowing good seed? Then, where did the weeds come from?

The problem of evil remains persistently unsolvable. Some of what we call evil is simply the mix of accident, incident, and happenstance that is daily life. Things just simply are not organized according to our convenience or desires. Often as not, we call evil that which conflicts with our version of how the world should run.

Whatever else is clear is that the field in which both crop seeds and weed seeds flourish is the human heart. Out of the heart flows great kindness, compassion, sympathy, creativity, hope. Out of the heart, as well, flows rage, selfishness, greed, jealousy. Indeed, good and evil often look alike or, at least, we like to dress them up that way. We are all adept at rationalizing the evil we do. *Original* sin? There's nothing original about it.

We are moral contortionists; we are ethical acrobats. Self-deceit is a strong fortress not easily breached even by love. We are each afflicted by it; some of us are lost in it. We may fool ourselves with our rationalizations, but we never fool God. Meanwhile, the bleak games continue. Consider Leonard Cohen's poem *All There is to Know About Adolph Eichmann*:

Eyes: Medium

Hair: Medium

Weight: Medium

Height: Medium

Distinguishing features: None

Number of fingers: Ten

Intelligence: Medium

What did you expect?

Talons?

Oversize incisors?

Green saliva?

Madness?

A clear-eyed look at life knows that all the time we spend thinking the glass is half full, our water is evaporating. All the time we think we are planting good seed, poison ivy, nightshade, and jimsonweed find their ways into the crevices. They absorb nutrients and moisture, they obscure sunlight and choke off life. We don't need gardening metaphors to suggest what's going on. *Evil* itself is a metaphor for all those influences, barriers, convictions and passions in and around us that thwart love and peace, contradict justice and mercy, diminish hope and faith, and confuse truth and beauty with what is base and crude. It doesn't wear horns, it doesn't smell of sulfur, it doesn't only come out at night. It is as ordinary as the day, as common as dirt, and can be a dead ringer for what we call good.

There is something in us that doesn't like to think of about these things. We don't want to accept that evil is a power against which we must contend. Having this attitude only increases the likelihood of it becoming more powerful and present, for if we don't believe something exists, we're hardly going to spend any time looking for it or fighting against it. Actually, though, the trial of bearing up under life's ambiguities becomes a whole lot easier when the reality of evil is taken seriously, because the failure of our dreams, and our own inability to do the good we want to do need no longer be great shocks or surprises. As Oliver Wendell Holmes is said to have told his fretful and obstinate daughter, "My Dear, if only you would realize how hard life is, things would go much easier for you."

Part of what it means to be mature in faith means to be realistic about life, and about self, and to fully acknowledge the warping pressure of sin and evil. Maturity in faith means, in part, being self-critical and to practice intentionally our skill at discerning the difference between wheat and weed. As William James observed, "Too many people think they are thinking when all they are doing is rearranging their prejudices." To talk about sin, then, is to talk personally. It is to escape from sin's effects by living in honesty instead of pretense and humility instead of arrogance. It is to honor life's honorable possibilities while shedding delusions about purity. It is not to condemn our lives to uselessness or to get lost in discussions of hell and punishment, for to talk about sin is to talk about grace. Few monarchs have been theologians, but we'll let

Catherine the Great have a line here: "I will be an autocrat; that's my trade. And the good Lord will forgive me; that's his."

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and Martin Luther saw each other as agents of the devil, because both were inflexibly committed to differing understandings of scripture and faith. Once Luther was excommunicated, he was driven more deeply into scripture and came to the realization that the real enemy of faith was not "out there" in someone or something else, but that he – Luther – was *simul justus et peccator* – at once a just man and a sinner, an understanding which becomes a portal to deeper faith based on a profound understanding of God's grace and our own need.

Sin, theologians tell us, is the occasion of grace. That is, because given the nature of our lives, complex and ambiguous as they are, full of contingency and change, God's grace is provided so that the relationship with goodness can never be broken by our error, egregious as it may be. In God's good grace, hope is not only viable but certain, and the claims of evil upon us can never be total.

Our lives are like the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, an extended metaphor about how good and evil coexist, side-by-side and intermixed. The parable does not attempt to explain the origin of evil. It simply acknowledges evil's continued presence and participation in human history, and asserts its ultimate defeat at the time of harvest.

Botanically speaking, the weed referred to in the parable is probably the bearded darnel, a plant which acts as host to a poisonous fungus. If darnel and wheat are harvested and ground together, the flour will be spoiled. The darnel is a particularly troublesome plant because it is very similar-looking to wheat at early stages of growth, and can only be easily identified when ripe.

In the parable the wheat and the weeds are specifically different plants. Presumably a botanist could always distinguish them. But in moral and ethical matters wheat and weed are often in hybrid form. That is, in human experience the good and the poisonous often grow on the same stalk.

If we are to take ourselves and our world seriously, if we are to take God seriously, we need to take evil seriously, both that which is outside of us and that which lives within. In the parable the owner allows the grain and the weed to grow together. Behind that decision lies the knowledge that the weeds will not choke the grain and overwhelm the field. That is, there is acceptance of the presence of evil in the world, but there is no sense of crisis that the growth of goodness will be restrained.

This confidence springs from the conviction that God's grace and goodness are present there in the mixed field of life. It is born of the faith that God knows the complexity of our lives, that we are loved, forgiven, and restored even in disaster. That is, God well knows how hard it is to live a hybrid life — to be wheat and weed at the same time. That is what grace is for, and forgiveness.

In the face of life's trials courage and insight and strength arise. Bones and muscles grow strong when we use them and would atrophy if life were but bliss and rest. We are not hothouse plants that can only thrive in a greenhouse environment with no defense against parasites or diseases which hardier relatives develop in the wild. There is a certain spiritual hardiness in us, and, perhaps, a capacity built over time to more quickly recognize what in our lives is wheat and what is weed and not just a tolerance that turns a blind eye to the sordid, the unjust, the ugly, and the toxic.

The story of Jacob and his dream is a parable of the presence of God even in life's rocky wildernesses. Life's rude places are continually being redeemed as holy places by God's intercourse with the world. Many a night we will toss restlessly, our bed like a field of stones, our pillow a boulder, before faith's imagination begins transforming the struggle into something hopeful. Faith is the ability to see the presence of God in the midst of the rude ordinary. Jacob is a biblical hero not because he was a saint. Jacob was both wheat and weed. But in him was a unique consciousness of God's constant traffic with our lives, of a gracious access between heaven and earth, each rung on the ladder the assurance of God's eagerness to be with us in the wilderness. Note that neither in his dream nor in his life was this ladder a means of escape or avoidance of the moral issues of his life, but a precious bridge of clarity about what he was called to be and do.

Faith is not about building a ladder to God, for God has already established the connection through grace. The task of faith is to open up our hearts to the Word which became flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth. The task of faith is not necessarily to spend all one's time weeding life's garden, but to be faithful, receptive, and hopeful so that the wheat may thrive.