

Promise of Presence
Genesis 28: 10-19a and Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
July 19, 2020

This was not an unusual story at our Neighborhood Breakfast: A young mother lost her job because she had missed too many days of work with sick children and no one else to watch over them. Without income, she could not pay her bills, and was worried that her utilities would be shut off, or she would be evicted from her home.

Her car had broken down, and she had no money for repairs. Without a car, she could not look for a new job. One thing had piled on top of another until she was overwhelmed with hardship. She felt like the world was out to get her. “How can God let this happen?” she asked. “What have I done to deserve this?”

Such a moment is not necessarily a good time to point out that bad things happen to good people. It is not a good time to have a conversation about theodicy, a fancy theological word that covers the question, “Why does God allow evil in the world?” People like this young mother do not need judgment; they need a glimmer of hope.

Enter Jesus, that spark of hope to those gathered on the beach, who, were in many ways like the guests at our breakfast. Among their own people they had watched the rich get richer, the poor poorer. They were asking the question, “How can God allow his people to continue to suffer and allow the evil to devour them and the world around them?” When would the Messiah deliver them from this miserable existence, and bring judgment to Israel’s oppressors? They needed answers.

Yet here was Jesus, looking and sounding like he might be the promised Messiah...telling them stories about farming? We are in pain! Who cares about weed control, when your world is falling down around your ears, to which Jesus replies, “Let anyone with ears listen and I will tell you why.” Jesus, the storyteller, is ever the teacher.

His stories, the parables, read us and are meant to have us embrace the truth about ourselves and the world around us. How we hear them depends on the condition of our hearts and minds. Wherever we may be in our journey of faith, these stories speak directly to questions in our current circumstance.

Questions about matters of the heart and faith; we all have them. They are easy to ask, but sometimes hard to answer, that is until, we trust the answers given us by God, answers which do not always come when and how and where we wish.

The speaker in Psalm 139 is facing intense trouble and feels that this is a time of testing, a time when God feels farthest away. Yet, in the end, he discovers the unconditional truth is this: God’s Spirit is inescapable. The Spirit reaches to the heavens. The Spirit soars over the farthest limits of the sea and descends into Sheol, that place that for the ancient Jews was representative of the afterlife and the sea, that mysterious place in Hebrew culture likened to a space of wide-open chaos and unpredictability. As the Psalmist

affirms God's presence everywhere, he affirms God's sovereignty in all circumstances of our lives; yes, even present in our questions.

So, it was also with Jacob in this story we have come to know as Jacob's Ladder. Leaving home and family, he has become a solo traveler in great need of God's presence with him. That presence comes to Jacob in a dream that connects heaven and earth. The dream was a revelation for its times because there were questions about how, or if, God interacted with humans on earth.

In many early religious traditions, not just those of Judaism, heaven and earth were separated from one another via a sort of fixed dome known as the firmament. This separation was largely impermeable, but this vision that Jacob has is clearly establishing a direct relationship between God and God's people. So, the answer to the question of the God's relationship with God's people on earth is a resounding "yes!" And from God, Jacob hears this promise, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised for you." God's presence with us is not all we are promised; however. God is still actively working to make good on those promises.

Sometimes, though, we have to unstop our own stubborn ears to listen and understand how those promises flourish and grow. Jesus says to us today: Understand the parable, and you will understand the God's kingdom of heaven on earth and the kingdom of heaven to come.

Then, he tells a story about judgment. Why? We are not sure, but perhaps people were being judged about their worthiness to enter the kingdom of heaven. Ever the teacher, Jesus is prompted to tell the crowd that "kingdom of God is like a farmer who planted wheat." And then in a strange twist to the story, the farmer does not want to slave to pull out the weeds from among the healthy wheat.

"Wait until harvest time." he says, "when the plants have been at least given a chance to mature. That's when you'll be able to really tell the difference between what is weed and what is not." It is a simple story, yet one that is hard to hear, if we are not willing to open our ears to the message of hope at its heart.

Jesus reminds the disciples that judging is not part of the plan for the Kingdom of Heaven, at least not human judging. In the kingdom of heaven, he says, God's fair and just judgment will come about in the end.

There is no getting around the fact that judgment and criticism are alive and well in our world. We are busy trying to figure out who is the weed and who is the wheat. Then, like good farmers, time is spent strategizing how the weeds are going to be eradicated. "Can't let 'em stay in the garden. Pull 'em! Pluck 'em! After that we'll have the perfect garden or friendship or place of employment or church!"

There is a great line from the Presbyterian pastor and father in the movie, “A River Runs Through It,” that fits this lesson so well: “I only know two things for certain in this life. First, there is a God, and second, I’m not God.”

Too often we humans do not take the time to look beneath the soil of a person, if you will, judge them, by appearance, to be a weed who needs to be pulled up and ousted out! Jesus is reminding us that even among the weediest people we know, there are times when the worrisome weed becomes worthwhile grain. By living in the grace and patience of God, the weeding process of our lives can produce good. As the saying goes: Please be patient; God is not finished with me yet.

Each of us has more weeds in our lives than we care to admit, but God knows they are there. Our good news is that all of life is a process where God, by amazing grace, thins out the weeds (aka sins) and makes us wheat (aka whole) once again. God would never say “Oh, that garden has gone to the weeds, so I think I will just ignore it and let it die.” Aren’t we thankful that when we were less than mature, God did not point and say, “Weed” and pull us from the garden?

I am grateful that God gave me time, and nurture, and surrounded me with people of grace and patience. And that is the point of this parable; neither should we give up on one another. Because ultimately, the parable is not about weeding the garden; it is about God using us for God’s good purposes, wicked, sinful weeds that we are.

For the Lord, this weeding is a labor of love. Loving the sinner and hating the sin means calling people into accountability for their actions, but always being willing to forgive. It means affirming the good in people, instead of always looking for the bad.

Our world today continues to be filled with places of hurt, places of pain, and places of uncertainty, but our passages today, promise that God is with us, that God is actively working on our behalf, and that God has given us the Holy Spirit to intercede in places of trial. Jesus adds that extra layer as a reminder that we are called not simply to recognize the promise of presence, but to participate in ways that bring the promise to life for others.

We are not meant to be paralyzed by the dark things that we see or read about in the news, but we are meant to be inspired to make a difference when and where we can, trusting that through God’s Spirit we have more than enough within us to do the Lord’s work.

It is easy to be cynical sometimes as we look out at the world around us. But true strength comes from our ability to have hope—even in that which might be unseen—because of the power of the promise of presence we have received through the Holy Spirit. That hope continues to live on every time we play a part in keeping God’s promise of presence with and for each other.

This place we call the kingdom of God on earth has been lovingly created for people just like you and me, people who are deeply aware of our sin and equally aware that in Jesus Christ God has chosen to forgive our sins. And if others are not aware that this earth lovingly created for them, it is up to us to keep sharing the lesson, speaking the parable, living the story! The story, as Jesus reminds us, is fine that we weeds and wheat live with one another, trusting that the gardening needs of our lives are ultimately being tended to by the One who loves the weeds and the wheat, and the mixture of both.

With the Psalmist and Jacob and generations who came after and who are still to come, may we embrace the truth of God's promise of presence, as high as the heavens, as deep as Sheol, as wide as the seas and for all eternity. And may we give thanksgiving that our Lord is about plucking up the weeds of our own lives to make us as healthy and whole as we were created to be. Amen