

July 20, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

***What Kind of World Is This?***

Psalm 139

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?*

Genesis 28:10-19a

*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"*

Matthew 13:24-30

*'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.'*

We don't really know Jacob's age or state of mind when he left home to find a wife in Haran, his grandfather Abraham's ancestral home. He was probably twenty-something, an age curiously mixed with confidence and confusion, bravado and fear. We are leaving childhood and youth behind, and just beginning, often through painful experiences, to navigate life on our own.

I think of Jacob as feeling heavily burdened as he shuffles toward Haran, kicking stones with his sandaled feet, trying to sort out the tumult and drama in his life. Things were not good at home. His mother Rebekah kept tension in the family, favoring Jacob over his brother Esau. She stoked the fire of Jacob's ambitiousness. Esau, the first-born, had been tricked out of the birthright and blessing by his mother and brother. Esau was not the sharpest arrow in the quiver, and your heart goes out to him. He overheard his father telling Jacob to find a wife from his own people and not from among the Canaanites. So, Esau figured he would do the same, trying to win his father's affection and approval. Then there is old Isaac, nearly blind, and being played by his wife and son. He seems check out of the whole thing.

Now everything is catching up to Jacob, it seems. After tricking his brother out of the birthright, Jacob likely feels anything but blessed. Now he is on a journey to find a wife, some cousin back in their ancestral home. This reminds us, by the way, that the Bible is not about "family values", in the sense that some folks go on about it these days! Jacob is part of a confusing, troubled, and dysfunctional family—like all families, to one extent or another. His family is supposed to be blessed by God. Where is God's blessing in all of this? What kind of life, what kind

of world is this? This may have been something of Jacob's state of spirit when he stopped to sleep out under the stars.

Jacob dreams of a ramp—ladder is not a good translation. It is like a wide ramp connecting heaven and earth. The heavenly messengers, or angels, are going up and down the ramp, fulfilling the myriad divine commands that govern things on earth (Gerhard Von Rad). Dreams in the Hebrew scriptures were understood to be the way that God communicated with people, revealing the deepest truth of things and providing guidance. So, in his dream, Jacob has stumbled upon central control, the connection between heaven and earth.

In the dream God tells Jacob he will be blessed and will be a blessing to nations. His offspring will multiply throughout the world, and God will be with him wherever he goes. This is a renewal of the original promise given to Jacob's grandfather Abraham. In all of the mess and confusion of Jacob's life, the promise is still there. In that moment, deepest reality opens up to him, and he sees the connection between heaven and earth, that God is always caring for the world, is always with the world that God made, in spite of how things look at any given time. Regardless of how badly human beings behave toward each other and the world, in spite of everything that troubles, perplexes, and causes us pain, God is with us. God is still calling us, blessing us, and empowering us to be channels of God's purposes. The world IS God's and everything in it (Ps. 24).

As we continue striving to live in faith and faithfulness, we will become more aware of the connectedness of heaven and earth, the sacred dimension of life, that God is everywhere that we can be, that everywhere we can be is holy ground. The ancient Celtic Christians spoke of "thin places" places where the sacredness of the world is especially apparent. Native American people have always known the sacred dimension of the world, honoring particular sacred places. Sharp Top, one of the two Peaks of Otter, was such a place in Native American history. People tell us that they experience this place, these forty acres, as a thin place. It is so to me.

Yet, I believe in the everywhere-ness of God, that the whole earth is filled with sacredness. The problem is our unawareness of that Presence. Our various emotional states, our thoughts, and our responses to the circumstances of human life and of our own lives obscure our sense of the sacred. I had an experience of this as I attended the Association of Disciples Musicians Conference in Decatur IL. I had a pleasant three hour drive from Indianapolis to Decatur after visiting family. The day was beautiful, with bright blue sky and puffy white clouds coasting above

the plains. Yet I have never really warmed up to the flatlands of the Midwest, and always feel a slight agoraphobia when away from the mountains. I checked into the large dormitory at Milliken University, and settled into the spartan room. There is nothing that feels much more desolate than a college dorm vacated for the summer. And, I was not sure how I was going to fit into this conference that is geared largely toward professional church musicians—organists, choir directors, handbell directors, and such. I sat in the desk chair in my room, quieted my thoughts, acknowledged my feelings and just let them be there, and breathed. Soon enough, I was able to let go of the things that were making me uneasy and anxious, and began to simply take in the sights and sounds around me, including the trains that would rumble down the line behind the dormitory. Before too long, I was more present and open. A warmth and peace displaced my previous state, along with a readiness to meet the experiences lay ahead. The words of Psalm 139 came to mind, reminding me that there is nowhere we can be where God is not, that there is sacredness everywhere. Our spiritual work is to remain open to that Presence.

This is why our commitment to an inward journey is so important. When we devote ourselves to regular times of prayer, silence, inner listening, reading and study, we are nurturing our capacity to be aware of the sacredness of life itself and our own lives. We do this especially through the times when we are most troubled, confused, or fearful. The more faithfully over time we continue our spiritual practice, the more our awareness of the sacredness of life grows and deepens. The challenges, struggles, and troubles do not go away, but we will gain confidence that this world and we ourselves are never separated from God's presence, care, purposes, and love. With Jacob, we will say in our hearts with increasing frequency: Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it! It is about waking up to deepest reality.

The question of the sacredness, the goodness of life, and of God's presence arises a bit differently in Jesus' parable. The realm or kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing good seeds in a field. The servants discover weeds in the field and rush to the owner. Weren't your seeds good? How did those weeds get there? The owner just says that an enemy did it, no more explanation than that. Do you want us to tear up the weeds? No, says the owner. You will pull up the wheat along with the weeds. The plant referred to here was called *darnel*. It looked very similar to wheat, and its roots intertwined with the roots of the wheat. If you pulled up the *darnel*, the wheat came with it. No, says the farmer, you'll just make things worse. Let it all grow, and at harvest we'll cut it all down and separate the wheat from the weeds.

Isn't God's world good? Then how did these weeds get here? What's up with this evil stuff

going on in and around us? Jesus doesn't get into philosophical discussions about the origin of evil. He affirms the presence of evil, but is more interested in the good seed that God sows. We can trust it, and we can trust the farmer, that is, God. The existence of evil, the resistance to the way of love and to God's will for justice, peace, and compassion is real. Yet Jesus does not focus on going after evil. He teaches overcoming evil with good. Our job is to stay focused on the wheat, the good seed, the Gospel, the kingdom of God. Jesus cautions his followers, then and now, against thinking we know how to go after evil and take it out. Jesus calls into question, through this parable, the crusading mentality. Jesus does not want zealots in his cause, who end up increasing the world's suffering. He wants those who are willing to learn and live the way of love, which alone is grounded in ultimate reality, that is, God.

Does this mean that we don't speak or act against the wrongs and evils in the world? Not at all. Parables are not moral lessons from which we draw absolute laws of behavior. Parables are meant to disturb our ordinary patterns of thinking, and to help us grow in wisdom and insight. I think that in this parable Jesus calls us to be wheat-centered, not weed-centered. Being wheat-centered means embodying in ourselves the very Gospel that we proclaim—the unconditional love of God in Jesus that calls forth in us our true humanity, the goodness with which God made us. Being wheat-centered points to our outward journey, the importance of discerning and remaining focused on what we feel ourselves called and gifted to do out of God's love for us and our love of God. In the midst of all that is discouraging, in the midst of our fears, doubts, and self-doubts, in the midst of all the great troubles and challenges in the world, it is humble yet disciplined faithfulness to the good seed that will bear fruit in and for the world, and in our own lives.

Being at the ADM conference last week reminded me of the formative influence of church music and church musicians in my life. I suppose, in the end, that is why I went. I remembered especially James D. Ware, who was for many years Minister of Youth and Music at First Christian Church, Roanoke VA. He was mentor and a second father to me and many other youth in our tumultuous teens years. He was a patient listener, but never let us take ourselves too seriously. We would discuss the various problems of life and in the world, but Jim seemed always to focus us on what WE were to do with our lives, and thereby make a difference. He recognized in me a love for music and nurtured it, pushing me when necessary. He was always faithfully there, teaching voice, piano, or organ lessons, planning music for the choir or trips for the youth group, gently but firmly challenging us to learn, to see the wider picture of things and to give our best. The good seed took root and had grown in him, and he sowed good seed in every young person whose life

he touched.

Jesus speaks of the final harvest, the separating of the weeds and wheat. This is probably the main point in the parable, a reminder that the ultimate outcome of things is in God's hands. That outcome is already determined. We don't have to fight that battle. Ours is to let the growth happen, to trust that the seed is good, that the field is God's good world, and to keep on being and sowing good seed. The weeds, as numerous and poisonous as they may seem, do not have a future, though it may not seem that way.

We, like Jacob, are on a spiritual journey of hearing God's promise of new life for us and the world. It is an inward journey of awakening to God's presence and leading along the way, wherever we are. The spiritual life could be described simply as waking up to the deepest reality of life: Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it! We are also on an outward journey of trusting in and being faithful to the good seed, the things that God calls and gifts us to do out of love. There will be times when we wonder what kind of world this is and whether the little we do is enough, given the extent of unhealthiness and wrongdoing in the world. I think we will always struggle with these things. Yet as we work as faithfully as we can with our commitments to the spiritual life as an inward and outward journey, we will grow in our faith, our trust, our confidence, and our joy.