

Shine Like the Sun

Part 3B – July 23, 2023

Genesis 28:10-19a

¹⁰ 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 ladder 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 him 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 blessed 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

²⁴ 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.’”

³⁶ 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 ears listen!



Today we acknowledge and celebrate God’s never-ending grace. It runs through both our Genesis and Matthew texts.

For us and for the folks we struggle with, today is a reminder to keep praying for the wayward child and for the difficult neighbor or co-worker or teammate. From the book of Genesis on we see God calling and equipping people whose flaws are as obvious as their strengths. Many of God’s choices may leave us shaking our heads. Many would certainly not be our first choice. And that is good news for you and for me. When I look in the mirror, I sometimes wonder why in the world God chose me to be used in the kingdom. Perhaps you’ve wondered about that a time or two as well. Yet we are all called to shine like the sun. Let us pray...

Jesus' story of the weeds and the wheat tells us that what may appear to be a lost cause to us isn't necessarily a lost cause to God's grace. When we are willing to be kingdom builders, we will be continually amazed at what God's grace can do and to whom that grace is extended to. This invites us to imagine a new reality where even the most flawed human beings, maybe people like you and me, can be disciples of Jesus Christ who work for the transformation of the world. One such person was Jacob. Please turn with me to Genesis 28 as we continue in his story.

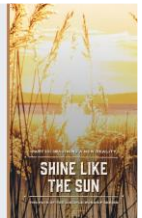
Before we delve into chapter 28, let's catch up from where we left off last Sunday. We left the story at the point when Jacob stole Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew. That was in Genesis 25. For a time Jacob and Rebekah lived in the lands of Canaan, near his family. God blesses him and reiterates the promise made to Abraham – to “*make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give your offspring all these lands*” (Genesis 26:4). As we turn to chapter 27, we see that Isaac is old and blind and near death. Isaac asks Esau to go out and hunt and then to prepare him some savory food so that he may bless Esau and then die.

Rebekah overhears this conversation and begins scheming to have Isaac bless Jacob instead of Esau. She prepares some savory food and dresses Jacob in Esau's clothing and places animal skins on his arms, making him as hairy as Esau. Impersonating Esau, Jacob brings in the food and ultimately is blessed by Isaac. Soon thereafter Esau returns, prepares some savory food, and goes to Isaac to receive the blessing. It is discovered that Jacob has stolen the blessing. Esau is furious. Isaac calls in Jacob and sends him away to his ancestral homelands, to Haran to find a wife from amongst his own people, just as he had done. Jacob flees Canaan to avoid being killed by Esau.

It is on his journey to Laban's house where we pick up the story with today's passage. We begin in verse 10. Jacob leaves and journeys for a day. The passage makes it sound like he is out for a stroll. Not really. He is fleeing for his life. He has cheated his brother once again and has conspired against his father with his mother. He has been sent away by his father Isaac to allow for time for Esau's anger to cool. Jacob travels as far as he can on day one and picks up a rock to use as a pillow. He falls asleep and quickly dreams *"that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."*

The Lord came and stood beside Jacob, once again promising the blessing of land and descendants. And then the Lord gives this promise: *"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."* What a message to hear when you are running for your life, not sure where to go or where home might be. The message was loud and clear: "Jacob, you are blessed. Jacob, you are not alone."

*"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."
- Genesis 28:15*



Instead of a rebuke or a scolding from God, Jacob heard a much different message. Jacob heard an invitation to become a part of God's plan. He heard the call to be a part of something greater than self. That's been his focus to this point. He came out of the womb grasping his brother Esau's heel and has been working to ensure his own future ever since. He schemed and schemed and got what he thought he wanted. And then, as he was running for his life, God came and showed him an incredible dream and invited him to become a part of a new reality, to be a part of the foundations of God's people. Jacob finds new life and new hope as God became present to him and promised him a future that would be blessed by God.

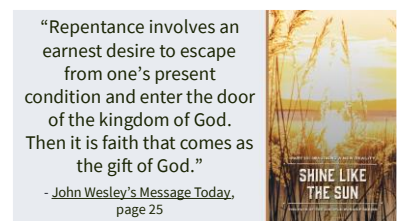
As we work through the rest of Jacob's story over the next few weeks, we will see that he was not a devout and absolutely obedient follower of God from this point forward. Yes, he does do some things well as he seeks to follow God's will and ways. God is ever present to Jacob. He will not ever again be alone. At times he does shine like the sun. But the old Jacob, the schemer and trickster, that person also surfaces now and then. Jacob still had a lot to learn about being a man of God. This was not the last rock that he would have for a pillow.



This dream that God gave to Jacob was a lot like prevenient grace. In our Methodist understanding, prevenient grace is the grace that goes before. John Wesley called prevenient grace “the front porch of religion.” It is God's prevenient grace that woos us and reaches out to us, even when we do not yet know Jesus as Savior. The dream was like this for Jacob. It was a revelation of God's presence in his life; it was God reaching out to him. For Wesley the entrance to a life of faith came through repentance, through the recognition of one's sins and of the need to repent of those sins. To know that we need a Savior is the first step towards beginning a relationship with God. The same was true for Jacob: he needed to know his need for God before he could think about entering a real relationship with God.



For Wesley, “Repentance involves an earnest desire to escape from one's present condition and enter the door of the kingdom of God. Then it is faith that comes as the gift of God” (John Wesley's Message Today, page 25). Fleeing from the only home he'd ever known, running from his only family, Jacob must've regretted his decisions and actions.



It was only through God's grace that he could begin to see a different future, to begin to have hope in the midst of this hopeless situation. Grace drew him to consider what could be. For Jacob, when God stands beside him and speaks to him, this is when he steps through the door, leaving the porch and entering into a relationship with God.

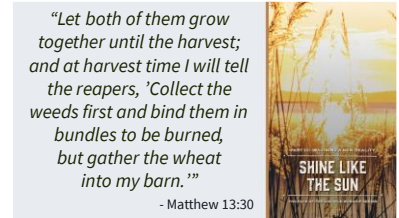
Yes, through God's grace he has begun a new journey with God, but he is far from perfect. In that way, Jacob reminds me a lot of me. Generally seeking to walk with God yet going my own way, being selfish or greedy some of the time. Maybe you too visit your old self on occasion. The truth is, we are all works in progress. Just like Jacob was at this point in his story, we are all not yet what God has destined us to be. Thankfully, God is not done with us yet. That idea is part of our New Testament passage too. Turn with me to Matthew 13 as we explore the parable of the weeds and the wheat.



As we turn to today's passage, Jesus continues teaching in parables. Following right on the heels of the parable of the sower, Jesus tells the parable of the weeds and the wheat.

Continuing the theme of planting, Jesus tells us that a man planted seed in his field. As he was waiting for the wheat to sprout and grow, weeds began to appear in the field as well. The servants ask about the weeds and the master replies, "*An enemy has done this.*" Here Jesus is acknowledging that evil is at work in the world. And like the one who snuck into the field to plant weeds, evil continues to be at work in our world and in our lives. At times Satan sneaks in and plants a weed in our heart. Sneaky as he is, sometimes we do not recognize it as a weed until it is more fully grown. At first, we do not always recognize the sin in our life. When the servants ask about pulling the weeds, they are told to wait. They might pull up the wheat along with the weeds.

Continuing, this instruction is given: *“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.’”*



As we jump down to verse 36, Jesus explains the parable to the disciples. Jesus unpacks the parable in pretty simple terms. The one who sows good seed is Jesus himself and the sower of weeds is Satan. The field represents the whole world with the wheat being the children of God and the weeds being the children of the evil one. The harvest will come at the end of the age, when Jesus returns, and the harvesters are the angels. The angels will first collect the children of the evil one, who will be bound and thrown into the fire, *“where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* Then the children of God, the righteous ones, will be left in the new kingdom of God and they will *“shine like the sun.”* What a great and glorious day that will be for the children of God. And it will be a sad and grievous day for the children of the evil one, for those who are identified by Jesus as weeds. The angels will have no trouble separating the wheat from the weeds.



Sometimes I have a problem when weeding. Maybe you do too. Early in the growing season, often I cannot tell the weeds from the plants, especially when I’ve planted something new. As individuals, we do not always know what we are looking at. We can mistake a plant for a weed or vice versa. Along these same lines, we all have our blind spots. We can think sins that others have are worse because we don’t have them. We are pretty quick to point out or to try and correct what we see as sin in other people’s lives yet are often very reluctant to address the obvious sins in our own lives.

If we want to be people and a church that practices radical hospitality and authentic welcome, then our approach to sin cannot be all about pointing fingers and condemning others.

And once in a while we have allowed a surface difference or a faulty perspective to cloud our understanding or acceptance of others. For a long time we Christians were sure that women were not as valued as men in God's kingdom. For a long time we were sure that white skin was a better guarantee of entrance into heaven than brown, black, yellow, or red skin. And for a long time we were convinced that Jesus wanted to make everyone just like us – that is if you were an educated white male living in Europe or America. What had long been accepted as true was eventually understood in a new way. What had been seen as wheat for a long time came to be seen as a weed. If we truly are to be people of love and grace, then we must see and work against injustice and inequality.

Connecting to the story of Jacob, at least two in his family would have considered him a weed. Reading the parable alongside Jacob's story is just a wonderful juxtaposition. He was at times selfish and greedy. Maybe you too would like to uproot such men or women from the story of God's people. But like with the parable, at this point in Genesis 28, God is clearly not done with Jacob. Herein is a great reminder for us too as we consider those that maybe we'd like to uproot from our lives or from the world. As we are reminded of in the parable, ultimate judgment is God's job, not ours. Along these lines, we are not to attempt to administer justice either. This too is God's job.

Now, we may think that God doesn't deal with sin the way we would or the way we'd like God to. At that point we may be tempted to want to step in and just handle this sin ourselves.

By asking us to leave the weeds alone, to wait for the angels to come for the harvest, Jesus is asking us to trust in God's ways, to believe that God's ways are always better than our ways. While sin and evil do exist in our world, we are called to leave the judging and the administering of justice to God.

As we close, we turn the idea of sin more personal. The question for us to consider and to wrestle with is this: What do we do with or about sin? First, what we do with sin. On the personal level, we avoid sin. We strive to live a life of righteousness out there in the world. We want to live a life that shines like the sun so that others can see the power of Christ at work in our lives. And when sin does arise in our hearts or minds, which it will, we call on the power of the Holy Spirit to help us battle the temptation that we are facing. And when we stumble and fall short, we offer repentance and we invite God's healing power into our lives, allowing it to wash away the sin and to transform us into who God wants us to be.

And second, what do we do about sin? When the sin of another person impacts or affects our lives, we react with love and grace. We work to transform the other through love and grace, not through hatred or judgment or exclusion. Through love and grace we offer healing to others, passing along the healing that we have experienced from God. And into the darkness we offer hope. To those wrestling with sin in their lives, we offer the hope that we find in Jesus Christ alone. With love and compassion, understanding and grace, we invite others into a relationship with the savior and redeemer of our lives and of the world, Jesus Christ.

There will be a day when we stand in glory and celebrate. Like Jacob, who saw God face to face, one day we too will stand beside God, and we will truly shine like the sun.

And maybe, just maybe, there will be a smile on God's face. It will form as we notice that some of those who we thought about pulling as weeds will be there with us in the garden of paradise. And maybe, just maybe, they will look at us and say, "You know, I once thought you to be a weed and I really wanted to pull you out. But thanks be to God, I did not." God will chuckle at us both. And then we will both think, yes, indeed, thanks be to God that God was patient and kind, merciful and forgiving. And maybe we will say to one another, "If not by the grace of God..." And we will look at one another and say, yes, thanks be to God. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How has your ability to see 'weeds' in your own life grown as you have walked longer with Christ? What advice could you give to others about this?
- 2) *Pray*. Where might God be having a Jacob moment with you – one where God's presence is making you aware of a needed change in your life? Pray, pray!
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 17:22-37. What similarities do you see here with the parable of the wheat and weeds? What does the Luke reading add to your understanding?