

From Romans: All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

It was a wonderful week at the Parish of the Good Shepherd. Our Outreach Committee had its hands full volunteering with B-SAFE, a summer program for urban children whose summers might otherwise be marked by staying home alone while their parents work, missing out on regular nutrition, and of course worse things. That is why the Diocese of Massachusetts started B-SAFE, so that these children would have a safe and loving environment in which to spend their summers. Nearly 600 of them do, at six locations throughout Boston.

This week, we took our turn feeding and playing with the children at St. A&M in Dorchester. Chrstin Gillooly did an amazing job organizing and leading the effort, and countless members of Good Shepherd gave in many ways—from donating food, to helping prepare it, to going down and being a part of the work. It represented who we are as a church, and I am thankful for that!

Part of our work this week seemed to me to compliment the themes of our readings today. First, what it means to dream the dreams of God. Secondly, what it means to be children of God. And finally, how to care for the good wheat of the Kingdom of God, even when there are so many weeds in life.

In our readings from Genesis, we have been following the story of Jacob. Jacob, you remember, was the twin son of Isaac and Rebekkah, the younger one who turned out to be the smart and the devious one. He was his mother’s favorite and the two of them teamed up on his brother in ways that make you wonder what kind of a mother would ever do something like that—forsaking one son for the other—so that his dying father’s final blessing would go, not to Esau, but to Jacob. Taking the birthright from his brother hadn’t been enough; he wanted the final blessing as well.

Well, as we remember, that didn’t sit too well with Esau, who had become the starved-out-of-a-birthright and

tricked-out-of-a-blessing, older brother. In fact, he planned to wait until his father had died and simply kill his brother. Problem solved. And that is actually where we find Jacob today in our reading from Genesis. His mother, from whom he must have inherited being tricky and devious, sent him to live with her brother, so that he could find a wife and avoid fratricide.

I say all of that because I think it is important in understanding exactly what must have happened when Jacob had his famous dream. It is possible, when we come to any story like this in Scripture, that we imagine it to be another feel-good story in the Bible: a ladder reaching to heaven, angels ascending and descending, and God promising wealth, prosperity and descendents. Yet in truth, it seems to me that none of that is what this story meant; it is a story of transformation. It is a story of how Jacob, despite himself, despite the ways he had stayed on top in life, despite the trouble he had gotten himself into, discovered that God was with him. And that message changed him forever.

Some of you will remember that the word for *angel* in the Old Testament can also mean *messenger*. Words in Hebrew often mean multiple things, like *Malach*—angel or messenger. So if you are like me and don't often see angels ascending and descending, as they do in this story, not to worry. I suspect we still have in common with Jacob, that if our hearts discern well, we receive messages from God one way or another.

Genesis tells us that when he woke up, after hearing all the ways in which God would bless him, that he didn't wake up and give thanks because he was going to be rich, though indeed that could have been the lesson he took from the messengers. He didn't even give thanks that God had promised him prolific descendents. No, he realized that the greater message, the greater lesson, was simply that—despite himself—God was with him and would be with him. “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place,” he said famously, “and I didn't even know it.” So he called that place *Beth-El*, which means *house of God*, because it was there that he finally got the message that God was with him.

In our gospel today, we have heard Jesus' parable about the wheat and the tares. This parable has always seemed implausible to me, mainly because you don't plant weeds. No, they just come. But with this far-fetched image at hand, Jesus explores more deeply how good and evil in life are often intertwined. The beautiful things of life and the challenging things of life live together. Places of deep darkness as well as places of unrivaled grace grow up together... and we don't know why.

Again this week, just as last week, we have a parable as well as its explanation. Incidentally, it happens slightly differently in the case of this text; the parable is separated from the explanation. The good people who created the RCL have solved this problem for us, though in fact they mask the fact that Matthew separated the parable from its explanation ever so slightly. You see, Matthew tells the parable of the wheat and tares, and then he includes two other parabolic sayings before he comes to the explanation. It is as if to say, Jesus moved on teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, but Matthew

came back, trying to understand exactly what Jesus must have meant. Kind of like figuring out Jacob's dream, perhaps. He came back to help people understand what Jesus must have meant.

He explains the parable of the wheat and tares in a particular way. If his explanation suits you, then I say fine! But if you have heard something else, too, that might also be okay. That is the point of teaching in parables, isn't it? Each of us hears what we need to hear. Perhaps Jesus, as it seems to me, was pointing to the mystery of wonderful and complicated that are both a part of life... both a part, even, of the Kingdom of heaven. We are all born into such goodness. And around us live stubborn challenges. And we don't know why. We would love, most days, simply to kill the weeds! Though Jesus says that his kingdom is not just about getting rid of the undesirable things of life. No, following him calls for patience, for the long-view of life, for discerning God's presence amid the difficult places of life. Like Jacob's vision was dreamed in a tricky place of life, so, too, Jesus says that the wheat grows up surrounded by weeds.

Thursday of this week, I had what we might call a Beth-El kind of moment. Charity is not the right word for what we did this week. A church's outreach is not the same as charity, at least not as it is commonly defined. No, a church's outreach is a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. It is a word and work of defiance! Although the wheat is surrounded by weeds, we love it and care for it and ensure its growth. Although the weeds try to mask what is true, we never forget that these are beloved children of God. We refuse to see them any other way. Poverty may mask them. Circumstances may weed their lives, but Jesus taught us not to see the world that way. He taught us to work through the weeds in order to discover the wheat that grows in his Kingdom.

So on Thursday of this week, I was asked to lead Optional Worship. It is not a given that these children are Christian, much less that they are Episcopalian, so they are offered but not required to come to worship. Twenty or thirty of them filed into the chapel at St. A&M. I had come ready for Communion. As it was time to begin, I

was told that there was no plan, no structure to Optional Worship. *Just wing it!*

So we began by singing a couple of songs. For the gospel, I used last week's parable of the different kinds of soil. We acted it out on each other's backs, which they loved. We massaged the soil, tapped the rocky soil. The birds pecked away some of the seeds. Others grew up. We came to the prayers of the people. On page 383 of the Book of Common Prayer, there are instructions as to what should be included in the prayers of the people. I am sorry to tell you we didn't follow the list! I asked each of them to name someone they loved, someone they were thankful for, someone they wanted to pray for. So they did. They mentioned moms and dads and grandparents and neighbors, and one even prayed for the man who comes to get the rent check.

Soon it was time for Communion. There were no Books of Common Prayer in their hands, nor would that have been familiar to them. I was taught in seminary how to do an ad hoc Eucharistic Prayer, when you don't have a

text to use, but to make sure you include the essentials. If you are wondering, those are Sursem Corda, Sanctus, Words of Institution, Epiclesis, and Doxology.

I don't know why I decided to do it this way, but I told them simply to repeat after me. It seemed like it was the best way to help them through the Sursem Corda and the Sanctus, and that would get me on to the Words of Institution. I was taught in the tradition of the high church, that including all the parts of the Eucharistic Prayer is important, so instead of watering it down, I asked them to help me in reciting all of it.

The strange, wonderful part came when we had finished the Sanctus. I smiled at them and said, "okay," giving them the cue not to repeat after me, but they didn't follow me. Whether they were enjoying this newfound role of Co-Celebrants or just didn't understand, I do not know. Either way, they kept repeating after me.

In the beginning you created us in your own image. *In the beginning you created us in your own image.*

When our human nature had taken us far from you, you sent your only Son Jesus Christ. *When our human nature had taken us far from you, you sent your only Son Jesus Christ.*

He lived and died as one of us, and reconciled us to you the God and Father of all. *He lived and died as one of us, and reconciled us to you the God and Father of all.*

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, *On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, he took bread, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them and said, he broke it and gave it to them and said, this is my body given for you. this is my body given for you. Do this to remember me. Do this to remember me.*

And so it went, and I think I must have felt like Jacob at Beth-El. I told you I don't see angels much, but here was certainly the exception! I was surrounded by this holy

band of God's messengers. It didn't take me long to realize this was a sacred place.

So when it came time for the Epiclesis, where the Celebrant holds his or her hands over the bread and wine, and says, *Send your Holy Spirit on these gifts that they may be for us the body and blood of your Son*, I knew they weren't just casual bystanders at this celebration. So I told them to hold up their hands like me, and to bless the bread and wine with me, not afraid to speak God's words of blessing and love.

The work of a church is not charity. It is a defiant claim of the demands of the very Kingdom of God. Our work among these children this week was only a sign of this.

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