

July 23, 2017

Genesis 28: 10-19a Matthew 13: 24-35

Rev. Joy R Haertig

*“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.”*

If you were here last week you may remember that Jacob is the one who talked his twin brother Essau out of his birth right because Essau was hungry for some of the stew Jacob was fixing. In the moment when his stomach was particularly growly, Essau gave it away for the sake of something to eat...

If you were to read the next story in Genesis (which the lectionary skips over) you would find that it happened again, only this time Jacob tricked his ailing father into giving Essau’s oldest-son blessing to him. When Essau found out what had happened he was furious. That is why his mother Rebekah encouraged him to go away until his brother had calmed down. Following her advice, Jacob left to put distance between he and his brother, and to look for a wife as well. Once he had enough distance to feel safe, he settled down for the night with his head on a stone and fell into a deep and dream-filled sleep.

Jacob was awestruck when he awoke from his dream. He was sure he had met God in his dreaming. At last the God of his father and grandfather became real to him. It had been a “thin place”. One of those places where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we are able to catch a glimpse or a sense, of the transcendent. (The kind of place Lucia described to us this morning in that moment when her beloved Ken looked into her eyes one last time.)

I like it that Jacob was outside, sleeping on the ground with his head on a rock, when he encountered the transcendent in a dream. Afterwards, he marked it as a holy place. The Hebrew people believed in the power of dreams – and in these early times there was no temple or synagogue that served as the central location of God’s presence. So why not experience God while you are on your way somewhere – sleeping on the ground under the stars?

The parable we heard from the Gospel of Matthew metaphorically points to the “invasiveness” of God. Why else would God be compared to a mustard plant which was considered a dreaded weed by farmers in Jesus’ day, or yeast which was understood as a contaminant?

In other words – God could “spread” or be found anywhere – far beyond our own imaginings. This is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is about God’s ability to be moving and transforming the world in ways that we can’t always see, discern or control. I also suspect it was Jesus way of saying to his listeners that the traditional way of doing things, may be just the opposite of how and where, God will work. That is what makes discerning the weeds from the good plants, so challenging.

Both of these stories challenge us to consider whether we are willing to be open to dreams and visions, to new ways of God being made known.

Today is the first of three coffee hour conversations in which we will be talking about the changing church. Not just our changing Magnolia church, but the church in America. We are starting to awaken to that reality with each passing year as the numbers in the pews grow smaller and the financial support grows thinner too.

Many of you here today grew up going to church. It was part of your weekly routine. Some of you raised your kids in the church too. They joined other kids in filling up Sunday school rooms and donned the Christmas costumes for the annual pageants. And many of you have found that your kids, now grown with kids of their own, are not going to church and may even wonder why you still do...

We who live in the Pacific Northwest are a bit ahead of the curve in these changes compared to other parts of the country. Many of our people “worship” the great outdoors. Like Jacob, they are more apt to encounter God while they are sleeping on the ground with their head on a rock (or at least an REI pillow). Others are finding the transcendent by volunteering at a local shelter or protesting the oil pipeline with others at Standing Rock.

I know that in the history of this local church there has been an evolution in how we have understood what being and doing “Church” means --- what community means --- and what vitality looks like in a church. These are the three topics in our first conversation today:

Community, vitality, and the role of our church building in our faith and connection to the community.

Even in my six year history here, there has been an evolution in our understanding of how we “do” worship. Two examples: Changing the choir from always sitting up front on chairs to being in the pews as part of the congregation. We struggled our way through the introduction of an additional Sing! hymnal that made some of us uncomfortable and feeling too “praiseworthy”. We have introduced new forms of service and outreach. As one example: For five years now we have welcomed a small group of mothers and their children from Mary’s Place to live in our fellowship hall for a week. We took careful steps together to decide if we were ready to contribute that kind of hands on time and energy and whether we were ready to share our newly painted/re-carpeted space in that way knowing it would add to the wear and tear to the building.

We are now experimenting with welcoming a newly formed nonprofit, Magnolia Arts Project, to share some of the building spaces that once upon a time held kids on Sunday mornings. It is causing some inconveniences and confusion about their purpose and value and what it has to do with us.

Gosh, we have had yoga groups, Tai Chi, and Zen Meditation in this “Christian’ building as well. Do they fit into our mission?

You can look around the community of Magnolia itself and know that in the 1940’s and 50’s – the focus was on building church buildings of every style and sort for proper American families to attend. Seattle is not known for being a church-going city, yet here we are in this small community with more than a dozen to choose from.

And most of us sitting here today, small as we are --- love this particular building.

We meet the transcendent in the beauty of the building itself. Its’ timeless beauty and architecture. You also meet the transcendent in the friendships that many of you share with one another, and in the varying ways you have served the broader community through our 70 plus year history.

People who study “church” will tell us that the next generations are not usually looking for a building to go to, to find God, or even to find community.

It does not mean that the next generations are any less hungry for the transcendent or the need to learn how to love more fully and do justice. Nor does it mean that God has turned out the lights and gone away, either. As a pastor who has been in the church in its more traditional form, all of her life, I find myself quite at home in the familiar ebb and flow of church life, and continue to find deep meaning and purpose in it. That being said, I believe it is my call and yours to be open to, and give support to the evolving shape of the Kin-dom of heaven in our midst in the forms that keep the gospel of love and justice alive and well.

The other evening I was sitting around a table with a group of friends talking about the reality of self-driving cars and the research being done on tube travel. Remember when we used to put our bank deposits in a canister and you could hear it get sucked down the shoot and over to the bank teller a few yards away? Apparently there is a chance that we will travel like that someday.

Honestly, on some days I feel like falling asleep and letting all these changes pass me by --- while on other days I rise up like Jacob and say, “surely, God must be in this place.”

I look forward to our conversations about who we are as Magnolia United Church of Christ and what kind of visions might be brewing in our midst, as you and I both know that God is not done with us.

Amen.