

## The 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; Romans 8:12-25**

**Genesis 28:10-19a** is the extremely well-known story of Jacob's dream at Bethel which was immortalized in the African slave spiritual, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder". It is a crucial story in the Jacob narrative for three reasons.

First, in this story, Jacob meets God upon his departure from Canaan. He meets God again upon his return to Canaan (Genesis 32:22-32), an equally famous account where he wrestles with God. Both incidents are meant to act as bookends to the story of Jacob's adventures in Haran, the homeland of the Abrahamic dynasty. These two events, happening respectively at Bethel and at Peniel are meant to be understood as "sacred portals" for Jacob's exit from the Promised Land and his re-entrance, signaling God's protective journeying with Jacob as he went to Haran to seek a wife (and thus continue the dynasty). The theological importance of these two events cannot be underestimated, for when both of these stories were told and remembered by the Israelite descendants of Jacob, all Near Eastern peoples believed that gods were territorial. That is, a god had power only in the country assigned to him. And that rule applied as much to Yahweh as it did to any other god. Therefore, theoretically, Yahweh had power only within Canaan and the Mount Sinai area of the wilderness. For God to journey with Jacob to Haran (into a territory belonging to another god), with ceremonies of departure and return occurring as Jacob first leaves and then returns to the sacred land, is extraordinary! It is even more extraordinary that Yahweh acts with greater power in the land of Haran than does the resident deity. This was a profound sequence of stories, therefore, that unequivocally demonstrated the truth of the Israelite assertion that Yahweh was not just another local deity but was instead the supreme god of the whole earth!

Second, this story introduces Bethel to the biblical narrative as "the house of God" and "the gate of heaven" (vs. 17). Bethel eventually becomes the second most important city in all Israel. In fact, it is referenced in the Hebrew Bible more often than any other city except Jerusalem! The name "Bethel" literally means, in Hebrew, "house of God" ("*beth*" or "house"; "*El*" or the generic name for "God"). As a city, it preceded Abraham by at least one hundred years. It later became a sacred city for the Canaanite god. But this story tells us that it was in this incident that Yahweh claimed Bethel as Yahweh's city. This is symbolized in verse 18 of this story by Jacob using the stone upon which he had earlier slept as an upright monolith or "pillar" that designated this place as Yahweh's "territory" (archaeologists have discovered that in a number of the earliest Israelite temples and sanctuary there was an upright "pillar" to mark the site as a place of Israelite worship).

Bethel went on to become even more pivotal to Jacob, for he came back to worship God there after his return from Haran. In that return worship, he insisted that his family destroy all the household gods they had brought with them from Haran, renew Yahweh's covenant with Abraham and with himself and to change his name from Jacob to Israel (35:10-15). After Jacob and his family moved to Egypt, Bethel was retaken by the Canaanites and became a worship center for their god. But it was later retaken by Joshua and converted into the abode of the Ark of the Covenant and the primary house of worship for Yahweh. Over the ensuing generations, it would move back-and-forth between Israel and Canaan (and always the site of the worship of

their respective gods) until it was finally taken by Israel (I Sam. 12-14). After that, it remained in Israelite hands as its primary sanctuary until it was replaced by Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. When the Israelite Empire broke into the two competing kingdoms of Judah and Israel and the Jerusalem temple remained the center of Judah's worship, Bethel became the center of worship for the Northern Kingdom of Israel and remained so until the destruction of that nation.

Third, and most important, this story of "Jacob's Ladder" exists primarily to maintain the continuity of and to advance the theme of God's promise to Abraham that "through you all the families of the earth will be blessed (12:3). For this story exists in order to demonstrate that God's promises made to Abraham and to Isaac are to be Jacob's, as well.

When one reads this story, one immediately assumes that Jacob was traveling through countryside, decided to bed down for the night, found a convenient protected nook for camping, struck a fire, rolled out his bedroll and settled down on the ground to sleep. But there is nothing in the text to confirm that assumption. Rather, the words "he came to a certain place" (vs. 11) means, in Hebrew, a designated and predetermined center of population or an occupied location. The very use of these words implies that Jacob, in planning his trip, said to himself "On my trip to Haran, the first "place" where I will spend my first night will be the city of Bethel" (i.e., "a certain place"). That this is so is confirmed by the vision he had that night.

The text tells us that, as Jacob slept, "he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven" (vs. 12). The Hebrew word used here (*sullam*), is unfortunately translated "ladder", not because it is wrong but because it conveys the wrong impression to western people unfamiliar with Near Eastern worship of 4,000 years ago. When we hear the word "ladder", the image that immediately leaps into our mind is that of a structure for climbing up and down consisting of two long sidepieces joined at intervals by crosspieces upon which one might step. No image would be further from what an ancient Israelite would mean when he would speak of a *sullam*!

A *sullam* was a staircase or ramp, most often constructed as the primary approach to a temple or a ziggurat. The description of "Jacob's ladder" contained in verse 12 clearly fits a description of a ziggurat. A ziggurat was a building constructed next to a temple that was designed to point the way to God (much as does a church tower next to a church building today). The ziggurat was designed both to be thoroughly planted on the ground but to ascend in ever narrowing levels so that the top appeared "to reach to heaven" (vs. 12). Further, the ziggurat was always faced with either a staircase or a ramp up which people could climb "toward heaven" either to pray or to bring their offerings to God, and down which "the angels of God were ascending and descending" (vs. 12b).

Whether there was a ziggurat at Bethel is not known, but there was almost certainly a shrine or center of worship there. Aware of the religious nature of the town, Jacob likely stopped in Bethel to spend the night. And as he slept, he dreamt of the standard structure of worship -- a ziggurat -- and saw, in his dream, "angels ascending and descending" on its staircase. But then, the most important action occurred both in this story and for the future of the nation of Israel. Jacob met God there!

In the Old Testament lesson for last Sunday's lectionary, I drew the reader's attention to the fact that Esau, as Jacob's older brother, was accorded by all convention both the birthright and made the legitimate heir of Abraham and Isaac. Although their conflict in the womb and at birth acted as a metaphor for the discord that would stand between the two boys, the true struggle between them was over the birthright and inheritance. For it was these two realities that were automatically accorded to Esau by reason of his earlier birth and that, rightfully, should determine the future of the children of Israel!

In that lesson, we examined Jacob's manipulative action to take the birthright for himself. As the foundation of Israelite society, the birthright was given to the first-born son of every Hebrew family as the vehicle for maintaining the future existence of that family. Jacob, by taking advantage of Esau's vulnerability because of his ravenous hunger, got Esau to surrender his birthright to Jacob. That, in turn, made Jacob the vehicle for maintaining the future existence (and wealth and power) of the clan of Abraham. Now, it was true that, as the scripture states, "Esau despised his birthright", and thus considered it of such little worth that he would surrender it to satisfy his momentary hunger. But it was equally true that Jacob had proven himself a manipulative and even devious brother by taking advantage of Esau's vulnerability to gain that birthright.

But gaining the birthright was insufficient to make Jacob the leader of the Abrahamic clan. He also needed to receive Isaac's blessing. A blessing was more than warm words of encouragement or approval given to someone, as it is today. A blessing was the transference of power and authority from the one giving the blessing to the one receiving the blessing. It was a "passing of the leadership baton". But in the passing of that authority and responsibility, a blessing was also the passing of the power and spiritual "dynamite" of a person to the other person. Thus, when Abraham gave his blessing to Isaac, he transferred to Isaac all the power that God had invested in him. And when Isaac would bless one of his sons, he would pass to him the accumulated power of both Abraham and Isaac. That son would become a "little Abraham" (this concept is captured in the word "Christian" which literally means a "Christ-one" or a "little Christ" -- what Paul was referring to when he blessed the Colossian Christians with the words, "let Christ dwell in you richly" Col. 3:16).

The story of Jacob's gaining of Esau's birthright is followed by Jacob's act of deceiving the nearly-blind Isaac to give to Jacob the blessing he had intended for Esau (Genesis 27:1-40). Isaac blessed Jacob with the words, "May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you" (27:28-29).

In that blessing, Isaac transferred all economic ("dew of heaven, fatness of earth, plenty of grain and wine), political ("let peoples serve you, nations bow down, be lord over your brothers") and religious ("Cursed be everyone who curses you, blessed be everyone who blesses you") power to Jacob. But he thought he was transferring that power to Esau! Once that blessing had been given, Abraham's and Isaac's spiritual, political, economic and social power had been transferred to Jacob. And once given, it could not be revoked. It had been given -- and now it

stood. Jacob was now the head of the Abrahamic household. He “owned” and controlled it all, for he was now “lord over your brother”! Jacob had won, and Esau had permanently lost.

But note how Jacob had won. It had been through deceit and manipulation that Jacob had both won the birthright and the blessing. It was not that God had acted to make Jacob the head of the clan. If it had been God’s intention to make Jacob the progenitor of the nation of Israel “through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed”, then God had been deprived of doing what God had intended to do to make Jacob that head. Jacob had taken the task upon himself – and as a result gained the everlasting enmity of his father and his brother.

Esau was understandably enraged! The scripture tells us, “Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing. And Esau said to himself, The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob” (27:41). So, although theoretically Jacob was now head of his father’s household, he could not claim his prize, for his brother was determined to kill him. Therefore, Jacob fled from Canaan and headed out toward Haran to find a wife and to let Esau’s temper cool. It was on the first night of that flight that he stopped at the city of Bethel. And there, in a dream-vision of angels ascending and descending a ziggurat linked to heaven, for the first time, Jacob heard the voice of God.

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give you and to your offspring; 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. 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” (28:13-15).

This is the first time Jacob meets God. And what a meeting it is. Jacob has gotten where he is up to this point in his life through his own initiative (and some encouragement and advice from his mother Rebekah). And to get to where he is, he has used every trick in the book. He has manipulated; he has lied; he has taken advantage of the vulnerability of his brother and the blindness of his father. Jacob now holds great power and wealth. But he has paid a terrible price for it. For his actions have led to the heartbreak and death of his father, the alienation of his mother from his brother, the deep animosity of his brother and his exile to a foreign country. Was gaining this wealth and power worth the price that both Jacob and his family had paid for Jacob’s ambition?

But now Jacob hears from God. And what he learns directly from God, he should have already known if he had listened to the stories Isaac told about Jacob’s grandfather Abraham and how he had believed so explicitly in God.

What Jacob learned from God that night was that his future did not lie in simply the actions he might take in order to build that future. His actions, instead, could as much lead to heartbreak and painful consequences for both himself and for his family as they could to the shaping of a destiny after which he would lust. Rather, what Jacob learned that night was that he was not the free agent that he supposed himself to be. Rather, he was a part of a much larger design intended by God over which he had little or no control, a future determined to shape the world. God’s

intentions was for the creation of a people who would, by their actions and beliefs and responses to God, become a blessing to all humanity by articulating and working toward the creation of God's shalom community upon the earth. And God would as much use the foolishness and blind ambition of a youth to reach that purpose as God would use the wisdom and the faithfulness of an old man!

This story is not of Jacob's conversion from a selfish, ambitious, position-hungry man to one who embraces God's shalom. That story will happen later on in the change of that man's name from Jacob to Israel. But this story does describe Jacob's first encounter with God, and his realization there is a far greater pattern of world destiny in which he is unwittingly participating. For God's actions "sway the future, and behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadows, keeping watch above God's own".<sup>1</sup>

"Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!' 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.' So Jacob called that place Bethel" (28:16-19a)!

**Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24** is one of the most profound and insightful psalms in the Psalter. It begins with the penetrating words, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away" (139:1-2). With these opening lines, the Psalmist introduces his theme – God's omniscient and utterly loving relationship to us. God knows us through and through because he has created us and loves us with the deepest, giving love – whether we respond to that love or not.

"You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it" (vss. 2-6).

What the Psalmist proclaims here reveals the profound difference between the ancient Hebrew faith and the religions that surrounded Israel. God is described in the most intimate terms possible. God knows each of us through and through, for nothing is hidden from him. It is not simply the words we speak or the actions we take that expose us to God. It is the very thoughts we think, even when those thoughts are in the process of being formed! Every instinct, every emotion, every reflection, every temptation that well up inside us, God already knows about before they are even fully formed. Yahweh has indeed "searched me and known me", and yet in spite of what he sees, still chooses to love me. We can only respond, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain (or even understand) it"!

The Psalmist then declares several things about our relationship with God. First, we cannot escape from God or his love – whether we are in heaven or in hell, the limits of the earth or of the universe, the extremes of night or day (139:7-12). God sees right through them – and us! "Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as day" (vs. 12).

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<sup>1</sup> James Russell Lowell, *Once to Every Man and Nation*.

Second, there is nothing we can do, think or be that will surprise God. He knows us fully because God created us. He knew us when we were only “unformed substance”. He “knit us together in our mother’s womb”. He determined the length of our life, and the substance of that life – even before the first day of that life occurred (vss. 13-18)!

Third, God knows our attitudes and actions toward others. He knows of our hatreds, our loathing of those who loath God. And he knows we know of that amazing love even of those who loathe God so that he will not act against them as we might, if we were God (vss. 19-22).

So, before such an awesome, remarkable, holy and loving God, how can we respond? There is only one way: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vss. 23-24)!

Psalm 139 is an overwhelming and moving psalm, so moving that I have found it is among the most comforting selections I can choose for a funeral or memorial service. What makes it so deeply touching is what separated this psalm from all the other religious literature of its time, and what separated Yahweh worship from the worship of pagan gods. Relationship with this God is personal! God has the most insightful understanding of each of us and all of us as God’s people; there is nothing that can be hidden from him. And yet, in spite of such a knowledge, our God chooses to love us and to call us to follow him. Yahweh is a God who wants relationship with his creation, and he will assertively seek such a relationship. Oneness with this God does not come about by following proper ritual, learning liturgy, performing sacrifices, conducting ordered worship but by coming into a face-to-face relationship with the One who can see right through you! Psalm 139 is such an overwhelming and moving psalm, because it so beautifully describes the overwhelming and moving God whom we worship and adore!

**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43** is the parable of the weeds sown within a field of wheat (vss. 24-30), and Jesus’ interpretation of that parable (vss. 36-43). First, let’s look at the parable itself.

“Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 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?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘then do you want us to go and gather the weeds?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. For 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.’” (vss. 24-30)

The parable is introduced with the words, “Jesus put before them another parable”. Actually, the Greek would be better translated, “He set before them another parable”. That choice of words is very intentional on Matthew’s part. He is always interested in demonstrating that Jesus is the Messiah (even though he is the marginalized Messiah), who is a “new Moses” presenting a “new

Law” to a “new twelve tribes” of Israel (the twelve disciples), and thus supplanting the old. This reality is alluded to in this passage. By writing, “Jesus set before them another parable”, Matthew is directly using a parallel word construction that appears in Exodus 19:7 and Deuteronomy 4:44 which state that Moses “set before” Israel commands that God had given him to shape the building of the people of God. Consequently, what Matthew is implying by using this phrase is that the parables constitute a new law or a new constitution for the people of Israel (and, consequently, God’s people).

In last Sunday’s examination of the parable literary form, we reflected on William Herzog’s definition of a parable as “not primarily a vehicle to communicate theology or ethics but a codification designed to stimulate social analysis and to expose the contradictions between the actual situation of the hearers and of God’s intended justice”.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the task of a parable was to get its hearers thinking about their social situation, and to analyze what it presently is over against what God intended their society to be. Doing such analysis would build a greater understanding of God’s intentions for their world, a clearer evaluation of the present situation over-against God’s intentions, and to motivate the hearers into action to address or even correct the world as it is.

How does this understanding of parable influence our reading and understanding of the parable of the weeds among the wheat? The parable is a simple one. It is a story of a farmer who sows his crop of wheat. But an enemy visits his field at night and infects that crop with the seed of weeds. As the plants begin to mature, those caring for the field begin to discern between the emerging wheat and the weeds. But recognizing those weeds is one thing; acting to get rid of them is another. Those tending the field recommend weeding the crop, but the farmer orders a different action: to allow both crops to grow to term and then harvest both crops, sending the wheat to market while burning the weeds.

That’s the parable. But what does it mean? Jesus supplies its meaning in verses 36-43, as a result of the discussion that this parable provoked. “Then Jesus 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”. He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!” (13:36-43)

The most important point of this parable is that corruption (the weed) is directly in the kingdom of God (the wheat). The weeds and the wheat are so mixed together that they cannot be separated without doing harm to both. Their roots intertwine, so that to root out one will inevitably pull up the other. Further, the weeds and the wheat are virtually indistinguishable in their early growth; it is only as mature plants at harvest time that their significant differences

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<sup>2</sup> William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1994), p. 28.

display themselves. Thus, the danger is that in pulling out what one might consider a young weed, one could easily “uproot” an immature shock of wheat.

This reality is particularly given voice in Jesus’ statement that is translated in the NRSV “they will collect out of the kingdom” (vs. 41). In order to capture the full sense of the Greek (*ek tes basileias autou*), it would be better translated “they will collect out of the midst of the kingdom”. That translation is far more nuanced, because Jesus is stating that the weeds are not foreign to the kingdom of God, but are part-and-parcel of the make-up of that kingdom. Whether one, in the final analysis, serves God or the Devil or gives himself finally to the priorities of God’s intended order or over to the priorities of Rome (serving the political, economic or values-creating system of any given country) cannot be discerned until the very end. It is not that there are two camps or two kingdoms standing over-against each other. It is that the camp of Satan is pitched in the very camp of God – and you can’t tell who belongs to which or even which is which until the judgment. The weeds are *in the midst of* the wheat, their roots intertwined with that wheat, and any attempt to uproot the one from the other (or even to tell the one from the other) will only result in their mutual destruction. The only time that destruction becomes moot is when one is harvesting both plants, because at their harvesting both plants die – and thus can be safely separated from the grasp of each other.

What Jesus is teaching those who follow him is that the world is not divided into a kingdom of evil and a kingdom of good arrayed against each other. Were that the world (or the church, for that matter) would be so simple! Rather, it is that evil seeps into God’s kingdom as the worship of pride, greed or lust for power and domination corrupts even the best motives of those who seek to serve Jesus or to build God’s just and equitable kingdom!

The problem lies, Jesus is teaching here, in discerning motives rather than actions. Actions are clear-cut. One can see what one has done. One’s actions either result in justice or in oppression, in sharing or in exploitation, in building a relationship or in dominating one. But what were the motives behind those actions? Prisons are filled with criminals who insist that they are innocent – not because they don’t believe that they did that crime, but that they think their actions were justifiable! As George Bernard Shaw so wisely put it, “We judge others by their actions but ourselves by our intentions”! Thus, it is likely that, in betraying Jesus, the motives of Judas Iscariot was to pressure Jesus into acting militarily (“calling on legions of angels”) to bring in God’s kingdom; but his action was to betray him so that Jesus’ crucifixion became inevitable.

Thus, Jesus is warning his listeners through this parable to the fact that the motives and actions of the Empire (lust for power, greed and domination) will creep into the church as it seeks to work for God’s kingdom of justice, equity, elimination of poverty and a loving relationship with people and environment alike. It is inevitable, like weeds disguised like wheat being sown in the field. Every leader of the church and every church will be tempted to use the tactics, embrace the strategies and seek the goals of “Rome” as it seeks to work for God’s kingdom here on earth. And it will justify the use of such instrumentalities and objectives by insisting that such use is what truly works in this world. Thus, it will “baptize” such tactics, strategies and goals by viewing them as instrumentalities, “evil” ways that will result in accomplishing “the good”.



In describing the infective nature of the evil that is “within the midst” of the church, its leaders and its devotees, Jesus takes it one step further and describes the source of that evil. It is not simply the need to build and to protect ecclesiastical empires, the denomination that has nurtured our growth in Christ, or those teachers and leaders who have blessed our lives. It is not simply allowing ourselves to be tempted by the lure of power, prestige, possessions or parochialism. Nor is it being seduced by the domination of the political system that has protected us with its laws or the economic system that has rewarded us for our support of it or the values systems that make up the “group-think” of our day. Evil is far, far more profound and insidious than that!

Jesus said, “The enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil”! This is a statement not to be ignored, because it was an integral part of Jesus’ theology. Dale Bruner, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century exegete of the New Testament, put it best when he wrote, “Jesus and the early church believed that the depths of evil are profounder than human foibles, that the mystery of inequity is larger than human miscalculations. Devil-less theology takes from the church the dramatic matrix within which Jesus himself saw reality enmeshed. The devil does not cease to exist because we say he ceases to exist; he simply reappears in more subtle forms”.<sup>3</sup> What Bruner reminds us is that evil isn’t exhausted through personal, corporate, social or psychological explanations. Evil is at the very foundation and heart of human existence and permeates all that we do and are. Only by personalizing evil as demonic and with a force that would seek both the destruction of God and the domination of the universe can we truly understand evil and its insidious impact upon even the holiest of people and our institutions!

There is one final comment that needs to be made about this parable as a means that Jesus used to get his hearers to think about their social situation and to analyze what both the leaders of the world and his followers (i.e., the Church) are doing to address that social situation over against what God intended their society to be. Warren Carter, in his commentary on Matthew, wrote, “The Gospel (of Matthew) regrettably uses imperial goals (destroying all adversaries) and patriarchal images (13:43) to picture God’s empire”.<sup>4</sup> To what is Carter referring? Carter is being critical of Matthew’s language and metaphors when the gospel-writer states, “at the end of the age, the Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw (the remainder) into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (vss. 40b-42). Carter is suggesting that in seeking to describe what will happen to those who became “weeds” in God’s kingdom, Matthew has succumbed to using the thinking of the Roman Empire. What do you do to your enemies? Why, you burn them, crucify them, and subject them to the most excruciating executions possible. Carter accuses Matthew of not being able to think outside of empire-terms and thus is guilty of the very thing about which Jesus was speaking in this parable. And for that infraction, Matthew should be criticized.

But that’s the whole point of this parable! What Jesus is seeking to communicate is that there are eternal consequences to the decisions we make – whether it is our decisions as individuals or those who either benefit from or provide leadership to the systems. The consequences we receive are the direct result of the decisions, actions and even motives that we have. If one lives

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<sup>3</sup> Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Warren Carter, “Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew”, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1771.

by the sword, one will die by the sword! What goes around comes around! So, even if we perceive ourselves as faithful servants of the Church but use the tactics and strategies of or become seduced by the values or objectives of the Empire, we will pay the price for it. That simply is the way life is. So, if we either consciously or unconsciously, serve the forces of domination, both we and they will pay a price for that service!

But the Church is not to give itself to the destruction of the opposition. It is not to pull out the weeds from the wheat, and face killing both. Our task is not to eliminate either literally or figuratively those with whom we differ, for to seek to destroy the opposition is only to lead to continuing revolution. As the great preacher Chrysostom put it, “We ought not to kill a heretic, seeing that thus a never ending war would be introduced into the world”.<sup>5</sup> Jesus proposes a far more radical strategy. From this parable of the weeds and the wheat (as well as throughout his teaching), Jesus saw the primary work of the Church to be that of infiltrating the Empire, carrying with them God’s kingdom and peacefully working for the transformation of the Empire by “infecting” the opposition.

Thus, the purpose of this parable is to first impress Jesus’ listeners with the extent of evil. The parable helps those who take it seriously to understand the enormity and complexity of evil, its invasion of even our best efforts and the relationship in the acting out of that evil between the personal, the systemic and the demonic. But it also helps those interacting with this parable to recognize that resorting to Empire ways will result in Empire consequences while following Jesus’ ways will end in a transformed world. Thus, the parable is designed to help its listeners to more realistically understand the church and to be exceedingly discerning in the strategy it uses and the values it embraces in working for Christ and His Kingdom!

**Romans 8:12-25** continues and advances the argument Paul had developed in the first eleven verses of chapter eight. It is through Jesus Christ, Paul declared in 8:1-11 that God has fulfilled the obligations of all people and the systems they have constructed to order their lives together. All the demands that our systems make upon us, all the demands that the specter of death and corruptibility of our own personalities make upon us, have been met and satisfied in Christ. In his death, Christ has met all the conditions of the law, all the conditions of the systems. He faced the worst of death for us; he plumbed the depths of human depravity – both individual and collective depravity. In that condescending act Christ took upon himself all that personal, corporate, and systemic evil could ever do. By taking such evil upon himself, Christ has liberated us – and all human institutions – from evil’s complex grasp.

Now, in verses 12-25, Paul takes his argument ever further – and in some profoundly surprising ways.

“So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels: Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, p. 499.

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 – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (vss. 12-17).

There is a significant shift that occurs in verse 12 in which Paul moves from a teaching/declarative mode more to a pastoral tone (without abandoning his teaching function). This is captured with his intentional use of the words “so then” (indicating a transition) and his switch from the pronoun “you” to the pronoun “we” (thus including himself in the conversation and writing corporately rather than individualistically). This shift demands that we pay attention to it as Paul continues to build his argument.

He develops this argument by continuing his unique use of the words “flesh” and “Spirit”. As developed fully in the previous passage on Romans 8, Paul uniquely used the word “flesh” to mean human nature separated from and estranged from God – and this, both individually and corporately (socially). Likewise, his unique use of the word “spirit” is taken directly from the Hebrew as God’s power that is blown into forgiven human beings and their societies, so that they are transformed from people of the “flesh” to people of the “Spirit”!

In today’s epistle lesson, Paul reminds the reader of the primary proclamation of the first eleven verses of Romans 8, that “if you live according to the flesh, you will die (or be cut off from God) but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live”. But now he extends his argument by asserting, “All you who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God”. Thus, we and the systems we construct to order our lives are normally dominated by “the flesh” and thus live life estranged from God and each other. But Christ has died for us, and by our embracing the sacrifice of his death, both we and the systems we maintain become filled with the power of God transforming us into God’s people. Thus, we can declare that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God”!

Paul then begins to work with the metaphor of being children as a way of explaining the unique relationship that grows between God and God’s redeemed as a result of their movement from “flesh” to “spirit”. When we receive God’s Spirit, we “receive a spirit of adoption”, Paul writes. That is, we become God’s adopted children. Paul is here introducing into his theological inquiry a Roman concept – that of adoption. Adoption was peculiar to Roman law, and does not appear as a concept in the Old Testament law system at all. Hebrew Law stipulated that the immediate next-of-kin would receive into his household the widow and children of his deceased brother; but they had no actual law of adoption. That is, the children and wife so received did not take on the name of the next-of-kin, but rather the next-of-kin would raise the children in the name of his deceased relative and in order to preserve that name and lineage. So the concept of adoption was peculiar to Roman law, in which the orphan legally became a part of the adopting family and was every bit as much a son or daughter of that family as any child born to that husband and wife.

What is intriguing here is that Paul uses the Roman law of adoption to explain the dynamic of God’s action toward us. In essence, God had only one “blood-son”, Jesus of Nazareth. But what God has done, Paul develops, is that all who are followers of this blood-son become adopted sons and daughters of God. That is, they become a part of God’s family *on an equal footing*

*with the legitimate son* (because in Roman law, once a child was adopted into a family, that child was legally no different than the natural children of that husband and wife).

The result of such total acceptance by God, Paul states, is that we can call God “Abba (Father)”. That is a very significant statement. In Aramaic (the language Jesus spoke), the word “*ab*” was the word for “father”; the “*ba*” was a diminutive of “*ab*”. The best translation of the term Paul uses here is “little father” or our more colloquial expression, “daddy”. It is not “dad” or “pop”, but “daddy”. It is the cry of a small child in the night that awakens from a nightmare and cries out for her father to protect and console her. It is a most poignant and tender expression – and it was used by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was facing into his inevitable crucifixion (Mark 14:36). It is God as “abba” whom we discover as children of the Spirit!

So it is, Paul argues, that “the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God”. No matter how we might feel at any point of time, no matter how dynamic or fallow our relationship with God might seem at any point of time, God’s power within us, God’s *pneuma* speaks at one with our own inner spirit that we are, indeed, adopted by God and thus belong to God as God’s legitimate children. Therefore, we are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”. These words sound poetic and lovely. And yet they are far more than poetic and lovely for they are describing the essence of our being chosen by God as his adopted children.

In Roman law, there were three legal consequences of one being adopted. First, one lost all rights to one’s blood-family, its fortune or position in the empire; instead, one became in the most legally binding way a child of the man into whose family one had been adopted. In other words, there was no way to back out of the agreement, once it had been made. Second, by being adopted, one became an heir to one’s new father’s estate. And being an heir was on an equal footing with the legitimately-fathered offspring of that father. Third, the old life of the adoptee was obliterated. Rather, it was as if the adoptee had become a whole new person. Thus, if he owed any debts, they were all forgiven. If she had been a slave, she was automatically freed from slavery. If one had been physically born into a peasant family and had been adopted by a noble family, one ceased to be a peasant and became nobility. Thus, for example, the Emperor Claudius had no male heirs and adopted the adult Nero, thus making him his legal successor to the Roman throne!

So, therefore, what Paul was writing here was utterly profound. He was saying that, because we have been chosen and adopted by God into God’s family, we are full heirs to all the benefits of God’s kingdom. We are heirs to the tradition of a politics of justice, an economics of equity and elimination of poverty, a religion of family relationship with God and all our brothers and sisters of this family. Further, we are “joint-heirs” with Jesus, or, in other words, on equal footing with Jesus in our shared inheritance. Jesus may be the natural son and we adopted children, but we are no less children of our “Abba” than is Jesus, and therefore, we share equally in the inheritance of the Kingdom. For God’s kingdom is for all those whom God has chosen and adopted into God’s family.

The result, consequently, is that because we have been chosen and adopted by God, we are no longer children of the “flesh” but are children of the “spirit”. We are no longer under the “law” or political, economic and religious systems created to order the lives of children of the “flesh”

but under God's rule of "abba" love, God's law. We have been chosen and accepted by God, not because we are so acceptable (because we are not; we are, instead, people who consistently break God's former law of Israel or God's present law of grace), but because of how God has chosen to act through the actions of Jesus Christ that adopted us as God's own. So, no matter how we might feel about ourselves at any given point of time, the real issue before us is not whether we are chosen and accepted by God – for we are. The only issue we face is whether we can accept that we are accepted!

Having made this bold assertion, Paul then comes to perhaps the most far-sweeping implication of God's grace that appears anywhere in Paul's writings. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen. But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (8:18-25).

Here, Paul's vision exceeds all boundaries! The context of this startling passage is Paul's analysis of why humans can't make and maintain consistently good systems (Romans 7:7-24), and why God's intervention through Jesus Christ is necessary to make systems act as God intended (7:25—8:17). So Paul, dealing with the transformation of the world's systems through Christ, in this passage takes it a giant step further by speculating on what Christ's death has done for the entire cosmos – the created order.

Paul asserts here that the entire created order is in bondage to decay. It is, in other words, "running down" (the second law of thermodynamics). Therefore, Paul asserts, it is subject to decadence and to sin. But such collapse is not inevitable. God, the creator of the cosmos, is still at work in the cosmos. And he is at work in the cosmos through Jesus Christ. "Creation will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). The created order will be saved. It will someday be set free from its own entropy and decay. And when it is set free from its seemingly inevitable running down, it will experience the same "freedom" and "glory" as do "the children of God".

It is, Paul suggests, as if creation is in the process of childbirth, "groaning in labor pains" to bring forth that which none of us has the capability to understand. But it will be a new creation, a new universe, and a new cosmos, as God would have it be. And the only way we can begin to glimpse this magnificent work of redemption and liberation that God is doing through Christ with the entire created order is to examine that work in the light of the work God is doing in us – for our redemption witnesses to us of "the first fruits of the Spirit". As God has done a miracle in our lives, so God will do a miracle in all of creation.

If a person understands Paul's theology to be solely about individual salvation, that person is woefully misunderstanding and underestimating Paul. An essential theme in Paul's writings is

that Jesus has died in order to bring about the redemption of individuals (for example, the earlier text from Paul that we examined today – Rom. 8:12-17). But an equally powerful theme throughout Paul's letters is the salvation of the corporate structures of society (e.g., Col. 1:15-20; II Cor. 5:17-20; Eph. 1:15-23). And here, in Rom. 8:18-25, Paul adds a third dimension of salvation – the redemption of the entire universe from entropy and decay. American Christianity seems to avoid those Pauline texts that deal with corporate, social or cosmic salvation or we symbolically reinterpret them. But if we are to understand the profundity and complexity of Paul's thought and, consequently, of the biblical message, we cannot afford to ignore those Scriptures or to trivialize them in order to keep from dealing honestly with them. Indeed, we *must* take them seriously and at their *face value*. We must be intellectually honest enough to allow the biblical writers to speak for themselves, rather than to reinterpret what they are saying in order to get them to fit into our preconceived understanding of the work God was doing through Christ for the redemption of the world. And such honesty requires us to both acknowledge and to examine the complexity of Paul's doctrine of salvation, recognizing that, at one and the same time, he understood God's work of redemption through Christ as being individual, corporate and cosmic, personal, social and systemic all at one and the same time. For to Paul, Christ had come to save the entire created order and all that is in it. That was the kind of God Paul served. And that is the kind of God he asks us to embrace, as well!

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