



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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## Tolerance for Ambiguity

Mt. 13:24-30; Rm. 8:18-25, Gen. 28:10-19a

A sermon by William M. Klein

23 July 2017

**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... (Gn. 28:10-19a NRSV)

**18** I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. **19** For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; **20** for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope **21** 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. **22** We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; **23** 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. **24** For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? **25** But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rm. 8:18-25 NRSV)

**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." (Mt. 13:24-30 NRSV)

Though I am no farmer, this parable Jesus told speaks clearly enough to me. Ours is a frustratingly imperfect world. That's not quite true. I suppose it would be more accurate to say the world is perfect but we seem darn good at "imperfecting" it.

In a previous life I worked at a center for down-and-outs.<sup>1</sup> One of the regular customers was a young homeless woman...let's call her Lucy. She was as tough as any woman I've known. She slept rough every night...which meant weathering not only the extremes of the weather, but also unwanted advances by too many men. Lucy ate whatever she could get her hands on – often food from trash cans or from street curbs. She also drank whatever she could lay her hands on. She had a foul mouth and threw a mean punch.

One day I saw her stagger toward the center for down-and-outs when a car pulled alongside her and a well-dressed, white haired woman rolled down the window and spoke to her. Lucy didn't even respond.

I asked the director of the center who the older lady was...and he said she was Lucy's mother. I was captivated...and after some digging, managed to contact the mother and set up a visit.

Once tea was served, I dared to broach the subject that had prompted my visit. "I am concerned about Lucy, ma'am...and was wondering what I could do..."

"Son," she said, "not a day goes by I do not grieve over that lovely young woman." That observation was through a mother's eye. She saw what no one else could see. She saw with an eye that remembered what had been...an eye that had seen beauty and wonder and delight. To see what that mother saw demanded of us a second and third glance...a glance sprinkled with imagination because the Lucy I knew was far from lovely.

"Not a day goes by I do not grieve over that lovely young woman," she said. "Her father and I gave her a good home. We saw to it she was raised in the church. We spent time with her and loved her. When she was little, she was sweet and happy and gentle. I close my eyes and see her twirling until she fell from dizziness and then laughing hysterically. But in her teenage years she changed...and left home. Our precious daughter was gone...and the person you see took her place."

"Do you think she will ever straighten herself out...or allow anyone to help her?" I asked.

"That is my hope and my prayer. I want nothing more in this life – but she is not mine. I loved her and did the best I could. I love her still...and would give my life in a wink if it would change things for her. My comfort, though, comes in knowing she is in God's hands...and God will never, ever let her go. And because of that assurance, my thoughts about Lucy are hope-filled."

That mother's words still raise for me two issues. **First**, how did she gain such a wise, healthy, and faithful perspective? To put it another way – how can we claim the depth of trust and hope she claimed?

The **second** issue is more connected to the texts we are considering. Why...why did Lucy become the person she became? When planted in good soil, why didn't she grow

and produce good fruit? Where did the weeds come from? Why was she attracted to the weeds rather than the good seed?

I surely wish I had answers to these questions. I wish I could find solutions to what makes people like Lucy choose as they do. I wish upon the first evening star that every plane that took off reached its destination...that every child that cried was fed and held...that racism was a by-gone evil...that every tyrant was transformed into a generous leader...that people would care for the earth rather than focusing upon the 1001 legitimate reasons why it is not practical...that all tears could be joy-filled...that no weeds grew in our gardens.

But weeds exist. There will always be sorrow and a mother's heartache over her child gone astray. Goodness and sinfulness are within each of us and will characterize our experience no matter how diligent we may be at rooting out the sin. The task for us as people of faith is to learn to make a grudging peace with obstinate ambiguity. We don't have to like it! We can work to remove it. But at some level we must learn to live with it.

Derek Bok was president of Harvard University from 1971-1991 and then again from 2006-2007. Once when he was asked about his expectations for students who would receive a Harvard education, he said, "**tolerance for ambiguity.**"<sup>2</sup>

He was right. Ambiguity is omnipresent...in the world around us and within our own hearts and thoughts and deeds. As Christians, learning tolerance for ubiquitous ambiguity must be done within the context of the faith. For when life's ambiguity is filtered through the lens of faith, then, as Paul suggested, "we hope for what we do not see...and we wait for it patiently, expectantly."<sup>3</sup>

3

The story of Jacob is familiar to us all. "We are climbing Jacob's ladder," we sang as children in Sunday School and when driving along on family vacations. "We are climbing Jacob's ladder...soldiers of the cross."

In so many ways Jacob was not your ideal hero. He was a trickster and a cheat. He took his brother Esau's birthright and tricked his father into giving him the blessing that was meant for Esau. Afraid for his life, he fled and made camp at the place where his grandparents (Abraham and Sarah) had built an altar as they entered the land years earlier. There he fell asleep and heaven and earth were joined by a stairway with God's messengers going up and down.

What was this strange stairway-to-heaven story all about? God was giving Jacob (and all people on uncertain, ambiguous paths) a way to proceed into the future. Though frightened by what he knew lay behind him (i.e., Esau ready to kill him) and no less threatened by the unknown that lay ahead, God was giving Jacob hope.

So many years later when the Hebrew children enslaved in Babylon, the religious leaders told the people Jacob's story as a way to say God would also give them a way into the future. Lucy's mother, frightened every time she thought about her daughter's life, was filled with hope by the God who beckoned Lucy, no less than Jacob, into the unknown future. From some place on that stairway to heaven, God let Jacob know he would go with him...that he was blessed directly by God and so didn't need his brother's blessing.<sup>4</sup>

The message that comes through to me, particularly as I read it alongside the other two texts for this morning, is that while our lives are unavoidably ambiguous and often

3

quite pain-filled, God gives us a future that is perpetually hope-filled. Paul reminds us of what hope is when he says, "hope that is seen is not hope...for who hopes for what is already a sure and certain thing?"<sup>5</sup> "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change."<sup>6</sup> It involves trusting enough in the God who can and will change the evidence to take the first step and the next step out into the unknown.

4

Jesus' parable suggests what we all know...wheat and tares are together sown. Wheat and tares comingle without and within us. We are a mixture of weeds and wheat and we always will be. As Martin Luther put it - we are simultaneously saint and sinner.<sup>7</sup>

Those people who forget this and portray themselves as pure goodness and others as pure evil are not simply guilty of ignorance...they are guilty of perpetuating a false and dangerous gospel that leads to hatred rather than community.<sup>8</sup> This is how it works. When you divide the world into children of light and children of darkness you can easily convince yourself you are a child of light. This self-deception allows those who think they are children of light to also think they can legitimately kill in the name of God, hate in the name of God, and practice cruelty in the name of God.<sup>9</sup> Blaise Pascal, 17th-century French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and Catholic theologian once observed, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."<sup>10</sup>

This ignorance is at the heart of the polarization that is devastating our nation and our world today...the inability or unwillingness to realize what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said is so true..."The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart."<sup>11</sup>

Living with mystery and ambiguity is not easy. We want life to be tidy and fair and just...but it just isn't. We want to think we can achieve perfection...but we just can't. We want to pluck out those pesky weeds and we try...but weed's roots are so intertwined with those of the good wheat.

We each have before us the tasks of daily living - pressures of paying bills, of meeting a payroll, of transporting children from event to event, of choosing between various options, of this or that meeting, and on and on. In the busyness of it all, our faith is often pushed to the background.

And yet...we find ourselves gathering each Sunday to remember...to confess our faults and failings...to confess again that what's wrong with the world is not someone else...what's wrong with the world is also you and me...and to hear again of God's love and mercy and amazing grace.<sup>12</sup> We gather in order to hear again that God alone has the last word in this life and in the next. We come to hear again that though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, nothing can negate God's claim on us - nothing can separate us from God's love.<sup>13</sup>

5

Oh yes, the task of the Christian is not easy. Just ask Lucy's mother. But because life is tough that doesn't mean it is dismal or joyless. Why? Because of who and what God is.

Though children of dust, and feeble as frail, in him shall we trust, nor find him to fail. God's mercies are tender and firm to the end - for he is our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.<sup>14</sup>

4

Glory to God in the highest. Amen.



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## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> I worked for the Iona Community in Glasgow, Scotland, in an outreach center for homeless people, street people, alcoholics, down and outs. The center, known as Community House, was located in the Clyde in city center. It has been demolished. The lady was one of the regular customers of the center— a lady from whom and through whom I learned many of life's lessons.

<sup>2</sup> Trotter, M. 1992. What Are You Waiting For? Nashville: Abingdon Press, 25.

<sup>3</sup> See Romans 8:25.

<sup>4</sup> Sacks, Jonathan. 2015. Not in God's Name. NY: Schocken Books, 141.

<sup>5</sup> See Romans 8:24.

<sup>6</sup> A phrase coined by Jim Wallis of *Sojourners Magazine*.

<sup>7</sup> Rohr, Richard. 2003. Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer (revised and updated edition). NY: Crossroad Pub, 41.

<sup>8</sup> You may find the following article of interest: <http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/> Thanks to Josh Harvey for passing this article along to me.

<sup>9</sup> Sacks, 54. Sacks talks about what he calls a "pathological dualism." He says it occurs when humanity itself is seen as either "unimpeachably good" or "irredeemably evil." You are either one or the other, depending on which side of a particular "Us vs. Them" conflict you stand. What makes pathological dualism so dangerous is its ability to do three things: 1) it makes you dehumanize or demonize your enemies; 2) it leads you to see yourself as a victim; and 3) it allows you to commit altruistic evil, killing in the name of the God of life, hating in the name of the God of love, and practicing cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.

<sup>10</sup> Sacks, 3. Don't know source of the quote.

<sup>11</sup> See Solzhenitsyn's 1973 book *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*.

<sup>12</sup> Yancey, Philip. 2001. Soul Survivor. NY: Doubleday, 58. When the *London Times* asked a number of writers for essays on the topic, "What's Wrong with the World?" G. K. Chesterton sent in the reply shortest and most to the point:

Dear Sirs,

I am.

Sincerely yours,

G. K. Chesterton

<sup>13</sup> Consider Martin Luther's hymn, *A Might Fortress Is Our God*.

<sup>14</sup> From the hymn, *O Worship the King, All Glorious Above*, vs. 5, No. 476.