

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

OT Reading: Genesis 28:10-19a

Gospel: Matt. 13:24-30; 36-43

Proper 11

We are climbing Jacob's ladder

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Soldiers of the cross.

The way in which we notice things, how we use our eyes and our imaginations matters.

When you look at Queen Anne's lace, or a thistle in full bloom, what do you see - beautiful flowers, or weeds?

When you hear the story of the ladder in Jacob's dream, a pathway between heaven and earth, what picture do you see in your mind? Our imaginations are often influenced by stories or images that have been handed down to us. It may be that your vision of this ladder comes from Sunday school stories or picture books from long ago: A beautiful winding staircase joining earth and heaven, with identical, white skinned, feminine angels effortlessly gliding up and down. No stress, no struggle; beautiful but unreal.

For those of us who follow Jesus, whose pathway between earth and heaven came through the pain and sacrifice of the cross, such a peaceful and picturesque image of a stairway to heaven is simply unrealistic, because it shows none of the stress and strain of human struggles. But there is another way to imagine the ladder from earth to heaven that God gave to Jacob in his dream: a bridge between the pain and conflict on earth and heaven's hope for justice and love, which is God's dream for a better world.

The song *Jacob's Ladder* was part of the culture of African slaves, who sang it as they worked in the cotton fields in the American South two centuries ago. It expresses the slaves' hope of escape from bondage, using the image of an upward struggle to reach a better place and a better life – the same hopes and longings that continue to be held by millions of oppressed people throughout the world.

*Every rung goes higher, higher
Every rung goes higher, higher
Every rung goes higher, higher
Soldiers of the cross*

The climb is not always a steady one. Sometimes the ladder sways in the wind, causing people to slip and slide downward. Sometimes there are gaps, with broken rungs which need to be repaired or replaced with new ones. And this is where our work comes in. As so many people and communities of the world struggle to climb out of poverty and despair we, God's soldiers need to keep working to build and strengthen that ladder between heaven and earth.

The journey and the work are slow because we are all sinners. Sometimes the ladder becomes crowded, and the temptation is to push past the slower, weaker ones who are in our way, or even allow them to fall; instead of remembering God's dream in which all are valued and loved, and none are regarded as useless weeds that need to be ripped up.

This leads us to today's second reading: the parable of the wheat and the weeds. In the parable the master reminds his servants that we should not be too quick to judge, or to pull out what we see as weeds. To be too quick runs the risk of mistaking what is a useful plant for a mere weed.

Ralph Waldo Emerson has described a weed as "a plant whose virtue has not yet been discovered". The word in today's parable that is translated as weed refers to one specific weed: darnel. While growing it looks almost exactly like wheat. It is only when mature that the darnel's grains turn black and so can be distinguished from the paler wheat grains. If consumed in large quantities, darnel can be poisonous. But in smaller amounts it has virtues that wheat does not possess. For millennia, darnel has been used as an anaesthetic, and as an intoxicant, giving an extra kick when added to beer and bread. Too much darnel and death results, but the right amount will relieve pain and bring joy.

History has at times witnessed human darnel, in the form of troublemakers who have worked to change the world for the better: Elijah, Jeremiah, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and others who have stood up and challenged the comfortable status quo. working to strengthen God's pathway of justice and love between earth and heaven.

Some of our dreams have been pale, like colourless wheat: mono-crops. Just as some of our imagined staircases have been pale and smooth: one dimensional.

It's tempting to look for that steady smooth staircase with no gaps or

broken rungs. But we all know that life is not that simple. There are times when we need to struggle together on what is often a rickety ladder, just as we need variety in our fields, strong wheat along with a bit of spiky darnel.

What would our world be like without a bit of darnel to bring life, colour and challenge to our institutions, our politics and our churches? What if no one were willing to speak up as Jesus and the prophets did against the sins of injustice and indifference, bringing hope to the downtrodden and inspiring us all with strength and courage?

Perhaps we should all try to be a little darnel and spike up God's field. Then perhaps, with Jesus' help we will be able to build that ladder so that all of God's children can live in love and freedom and give God glory.

Rise and shine and give God glory

Rise and shine and give God glory

Rise and shine and give God glory

Soldiers of the cross

Amen

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