

The Perfect and the Possible

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Genesis 32: 22-31
Matthew 13: 24-30

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Binkley Baptist Church

A couple of summers ago I participated in a program sponsored by the National Farm Worker Ministry in which church volunteers drove out to farms in eastern North Carolina on Sunday afternoons to provide transportation to farm workers who wanted to attend union meetings. These monthly gatherings were convened by FLOC, the farm worker union which had begun organizing to help workers negotiate better housing, working conditions, and wages. The meetings were eagerly anticipated by the workers who participated, but since most had no vehicles of their own, they depended upon church volunteers to pick them up and take them back when meetings were over.

Dubbed “Project Solidarity”, this program was a win-win for all concerned. Farm workers who lived in rural, isolated areas with no transportation welcomed an opportunity to be with colleagues in a setting where they could air concerns, make suggestions, and be heard and respected. Those of us who volunteered to drive also enjoyed the chance to meet and get to know a population that is largely invisible to most of society.

I remember one hot Sunday afternoon when I was asked to pick up some workers at a farm near Benson. Volunteers are given directions, but you need an adventurous spirit and some luck to actually find some of the pick-up sites. I had been following the state roads between fields of tobacco, cucumbers, and cantaloupe, and then turned onto a dirt driveway that appeared to be the farm entrance. I passed some tractors and continued to follow the dusty drive behind some sheds and outbuildings. Finally, I saw a small trailer that seemed to be inhabited. Dirty boots stood outside the door and freshly washed shirts and jeans hung on a make shift clothes line.

I knocked, and a middle-aged Mexican man opened the door, his black hair just beginning to grey around the temples. I mustered enough mediocre Spanish to introduce myself and ask if he knew about the union meetings. His eyes brightened, and he said he did and was glad to go to the one that afternoon in Raleigh. His name was Alejandro, and he was the only one there, he explained; the others had been taken by the crew leader into town to buy groceries. I waited in the car while he took a minute to change clothes, then he reappeared, shutting behind him the torn screen door. He was wearing a clean shirt and what might have been his only pair of nicer boots. As he stepped down a couple of wooden stairs and walked to the car, I noticed that he had a significant limp.

We began driving back down the dirt path, and Alejandro thanked me profusely for picking him up. He spoke with a formal and gracious politeness, and we struck up a conversation as I drove another 30 miles to different farm to pick up three more workers. Alejandro was from Chiapas, and he had been coming to North Carolina on an H2A visa for 11 years. He was married, with four children and two young grandchildren, and he had a small

shop in his home town. However, the income from his tiny shop was not enough to provide for his family, so he chose to work in the North Carolina fields from April through October every year, while his wife minded the store at home.

Working here was very hard, Alejandro said. The past few summers had seen record-breaking heat, and there were times, he said, when he became ill from the sun and had to come back to the trailer to rest. He was not as young as he used to be, he quipped with a gentle smile. A few years ago, his leg had been injured when he fell off the back of a pickup truck, but he was proud of the fact that the farmer who hired him every summer still specifically asked for him, because Alejandro did his job well. I asked him what his boss thought about the new agreement between the farm worker union and the North Carolina Grower's Association, and Alejandro said that the farmer didn't like it much, but that he respected Alejandro's decision to participate in the union.

We continued to talk about the conditions for farm workers in North Carolina, the economic situation in Mexico, and national politics. I was enchanted by this gracious, dignified man with the calloused hands and kind eyes. When we arrived at the school in Raleigh where the union meeting was being held, Alejandro was telling me about his family. He missed them very much when he was away from Mexico. Work was hard, and he didn't know how much longer his health would hold out. But, as he got out of the car to go inside for the meeting, he told me with pride that his earnings had enabled two of his children to attend university, a dream he never imagined could be a reality.

"La vida no es perfecta, pero mucho es posible", he said, with a smile, as he limped toward the school doorway. "Life is not perfect, but still, much is possible."

Limping through life; that's what all of us do in one way or another. Although we may not face the hardships that Alejandro and others must experience on a daily basis, we have our own struggles that remind us that, indeed, life is not perfect. As we grow older, we find that the world is not the Garden of Eden we had expected when we were children. We discover that we can't write the script for everything that happens to us. Time and again, we see the truth in those old cliches like, "the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry", and "life is what happens when you've planned something else." We become painfully aware that bad things happen to good people, that bad things also happen to us, and that suffering is a part of existence.

As Scott Peck says in his book, **Further Along The Road Less Traveled**, (Simon and Schuster: 1993, p. 19), life is NOT about a return to Eden. We have eaten the apple and become conscious. We cannot go back, but can only go forward. Since we cannot return to our innocent childhood, we must grow up. And growing up means going "forward through the desert of life, making our way painfully over the parched and barren ground into deeper levels of consciousness."

We live in the present imperfect, a place of struggle, of journey, and of divine encounter. As you may remember from high school grammar lessons, the imperfect tense is defined as a

verb which designates "a continuing state or an incomplete action." This is opposed to the perfect tense which expresses completed actions that do not continue.

We live in the present imperfect. We are always moving forward, continuing on that unending journey of spiritual growth which carries us through the mountains and valleys of life. For me, and I would guess for many of you, there are two challenges as we journey onward: savoring the present moment and accepting life as imperfect.

Like some of you, I've taken the Myers Briggs personality test, and I've found that it has helped me become more aware that people are hard-wired differently. It reminds me that my family, professional colleagues, and friends are really not *trying* to drive me crazy, they are just put together with a different psychic makeup.

One of the things that I learned about my own personality type is that I tend to be overly future oriented instead of focusing primarily on the present. This means that I often romanticize the future and have unrealistic expectations about what will happen "someday". That next job will surely be the best situation. When the kids finish college and get established on their own, *then* I'll be able to change my lifestyle to one that is more balanced and manageable. There's always something better around the next corner! It is an ongoing challenge for me to stop, breathe, and take in all that the present moment has to offer, imperfect as it is.

Children seem to do this best. They can be our teachers. I've been enjoying sitting in my office at Binkley the past week and watching through the window as the Preschool children play in the wading pools in the courtyard. They are completely absorbed in their play, splashing, paddling, dipping cups and toys into the water. Their focus is on the immediate, amazing moment that is right before them. And then there was the tiny girl I saw at the Farmer's Market the other day. Her mother had just bought some ripe tomatoes, and the daughter didn't wait to try one. She had red juice running down her chin, a tomato clutched in her hand, and a big smile. Life was good! The future was nowhere in this child's mind. The immediate joy of the present was all that mattered.

The poet John Greenleaf Whittier could have been writing about this tiny girl in his poem, *The Soul and I*:

*The Present, the Present is all thou hast
For thy sure possessing;
Like the patriarch's angel hold it fast
Till it gives its blessing.*

Scott Peck observes that people are born with differences in cognition as to how they perceive and know the world around them. Some folks seem to selectively perceive the negative. They feel that it is their right to plan out the paths of their lives and that fairy tale endings are what they deserve. Of course, they find themselves getting angry and depressed when things don't work out that way.

Peck makes the point that one of the goals of psychotherapy is to help people with depression learn how to cognate differently. In other words, therapy should teach them to learn to see in a different way and have different expectations. This doesn't mean ignoring suffering or minimizing pain. But it does mean that instead of dwelling on the negative, we can choose to see that life is a profound mystery, that it is full of great goodness as well as great pain, and that we can choose how we will respond to this imperfect world. As Alejandro said so well, life is not perfect, but much is possible.

In fact, it is how we respond to life's dark side that may be most important. This was the discovery made by Viktor Frankl in the midst of his imprisonment in a German concentration camp. A psychiatrist who had studied with Jung, Frankl wrote about this revelation during his dark days of hunger, torture, and suffering. He realized that though he could not control anything else in his life, he was still free to choose his attitude. Frankl wrote: "What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us" (*Man's Search For Meaning: Beacon Press, 1962*).

Even when his actions were totally controlled by his captors, he was still free to choose: he could succumb to despair and anger, or he could accept his suffering without giving up on God. He could always choose to act with compassion, comforting those around him, keeping hope alive. No one could take from him the freedom of choosing how to perceive the world, how he would respond, and the attitude he would live with.

There are some good words of advice from Alcoholic's Anonymous which can help us move to a more positive mindset: "Act as if", or "Fake it to make it." Frankl chose to act "as if" hope were alive. Sometimes this is the most courageous thing we can do. When we are slipping into disillusionment and despair, when the imperfect present seems to be not only imperfect, but distorted and broken, then we can still make the brave choice to act "as if" hope were alive. And as Emily Dickinson writes, this alone can sometimes be enough to get us through the dark times.

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all*

Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed...For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." God is at work now. Yet, even the kingdom of God cannot be described in the present perfect tense, because it is not completed. It is here in the messy, mixed-up, unfinished world around us, where wheat and weeds grow up together. I have often thought that it would be nice to have no weeds, a world without problems, pain, or death. But,

the reality is that the weeds are here, and we have to accept that the good and the bad will both will be in the same field. We must trust somehow that the harvest will come out right in the end.

The present imperfect is what we have, and it is what matters. We should not let our desire for perfection keep us from doing the possible. And if we focus on the present moment in the same way that a tiny girl concentrates on a ripe, summer tomato, we might find surprises, treasures “hidden in the fields of the daily that we are given to plow” (Prayer by Ted Loder, *A Grateful Heart*, M.J. Ryan, ed., MJF Books, New York, 1994, p. 129). Our common, daily routines often mask an unseen holiness.

In Saul Bellows novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the main character, Artur Sammler, ask this question: "And what is 'common' about 'the common life' What if some genius were to do with 'common life' what Einstein did with matter? Finding its energetics, uncovering its radiance?"

Uncovering the "radiance of common life" is what Jewish mystics believe to be our purpose. Isaac Luria, a Palestinian of Spanish descent, was a Jewish mystic who lived in the 16th century. I've mentioned Isaac Luria in other sermons here at Binkley. I find myself drawn to his wonderful images and spiritual metaphors. Luria believed that in the beginning, God shone Divine Energy, a Holy Light, toward the world. God had made vessels to receive and contain this Divine Energy, but they were flawed and weak. They could not hold such perfect Holiness. When this Divine Force poured into them, they shattered and broke, scattering shards of sacred Light everywhere.

And so, for all time these shards have become imbedded in all of creation. Divine light is everywhere, in the world around us and in the hearts of women and men. Pieces of God are thoroughly mixed up in the mess and muck of existence. Nothing is unalloyed. Pleasure and pain are always entwined; wheat and weeds grow up together.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, it is our job to repair creation. Our vocation is to discover and lift up these shards of Divine Light. We have a moral responsibility to do "Tikkun Olam", the Hebrew words for "repairing creation". And in a mysterious and wonderful way, by repairing creation, we are also "re-harmonizing God."

We live in the present imperfect. Our lives are verbs, not nouns. They are never complete or finished. And because pieces of God are everywhere, there is no aspect of life that cannot contain some holiness. It is there in the joy of relationship, among the wonders of nature, in all things bright and beautiful.

But the sacred is also present in the midst of chaos, hidden even in war and suffering and poverty, in the pain of mental illness, addiction, or disease. Pieces of God can still be found in the darkest corners of our imperfect lives, those places where we feel most fragile, unworthy, and broken...the places that never completely heal, but leave us with a limp.

God is also broken, and God is there, present, the substance of things unseen. We don't have to wait for "pie in the sky". The Kingdom of God is among you, says the Christ. It is here and now. It is not only the end of the journey, but the journey itself. It is the very road of life we walk now with other pilgrims, gathering up the twinkling pieces of God along the way. When we find a shard of light, what should we do? We should hold it up, savor it, cherish it, allow it to work its magic on us so that when the path gets darker up ahead, we can remember the twinkling.

Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, a rabbi in Boulder, Colorado, calls this action, "domesticating the peak experience". We don't do this very well. God attempts to get our attention all the time. We continually brush up against the Holy and then forget we have just touched it. We are a lot like Jacob. Yet, even that flawed trickster Jacob felt some impact from his encounter with God which carried over into the next part of his journey. For, the chapter which follows today's reading from Genesis tells us that he limped toward a meeting with his estranged brother, Esau, and when they met, it was with forgiveness and good will. Jacob was able to say to Esau, "I look in your eyes and I see the face of God". Genesis 33:10.

I have always liked Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales". This centuries old classic contains truths which are timeless. It is about all kinds of people, flawed people, imperfect people, who go on a pilgrimage and find themselves traveling together. They pass the time by telling each other stories of their lives. After a while, we begin to realize that their destination is really not important. Their tales, and our lives, happen on the road. It is our relationships and stories that matter. We look in the eyes of another pilgrim and see God, whether on the road to Canterbury or to a farm worker gathering in Raleigh.

May we become good travelers as we limp along in the present imperfect. May we seize the day, and not let it go until we wring from it a blessing. And may we remember to stop, breathe, and savor the daily joys of the ordinary, especially wading pools and ripe tomatoes!