

07/19/20 - Pentecost 7A, Proper 11A

“The Work of Angels” - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

When Kate and I were at Colonial Church of Edina, we were part of a very close small group. One of the couples there worked for the Gallup Organization, which was a Christian based leadership development group. They would go out to large corporations and churches and do leadership training and help churches through difficult times. Our small group got to be guinea pigs for a new development tool created by Gallup. It was called StrengthsFinder, and was a whole bunch of inventory questions that categorized each person into 5 strengths out of 34 strengths within four categories.

I am not a fan of personality inventories, but this one was different. Based on scripture, the writers had determined that most organizations, and most individuals, wander down blind alleys by trying to do something they believe is the right thing to do: find out where the company or person is weak and then build up the weaknesses. The authors of StrengthsFinder said this was all wrong. Nowhere in Scripture do we see the desire to strengthen weaknesses. Instead, we see people building on their strengths.

Jesus recognized this. Peter was impulsive and eager. It could get him into trouble, but Peter’s enthusiasm and ‘do now, think later’ approach is exactly what you would probably want if you needed to send disciples out into the world to let others know of the Good News. Peter made mistakes, but his mistakes were because his strengths were misdirected, not just because his weaknesses pulled him down. King David’s strengths were loyalty, faith, creativity, and a willingness to take action even when it was not well-advised. Again, David made some horrific errors of judgment, but these were because his strengths overwhelmed his discernment, not just because of his weaknesses.

Many of us spend much of our lives trying to fix our weaknesses, parts of ourselves that are not perfect or perfected. Many of us also spend a lot of

time trying to fix the perceived weaknesses in others as well. I found the approach of the StrengthsFinder book to be a profound revision of how I try to deal with other people. Instead of focusing on weaknesses and strengthening those weaknesses, I try to ask, What are the strengths present here? What can we build on to improve those strengths?

Paul takes this approach in several places. The phrase he uses is “*build up one another*”.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, he says:

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

This desire to build up one another and focus on strengths is also expressed in Philippians 2, when Paul says:

14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing, 15 that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. 18 Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

In Jesus’ parable today, we see that the workers of the field are very concerned about the weeds. Worse, the weeds are among the wheat because someone attempted to ruin the field with the weeds. Weeds can choke out the wheat and can dominate the field, destroying the fruit. But the master says to leave the weeds alone. Later, when the reapers come through, we will have them gather up the weeds first, then they will gather the grain.

We, like the slaves in our story today, really, really want to get into the field and fix the thing that weakens the fruit of the field. Jesus is surprising in his explanation of the parable to the disciples. He says:

“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom.

The field is the world, and the good seed of the world are the children of the Kingdom. We grow into the good fruit of the field, you and I. We grow because Jesus has planted us. Think about that for a moment. WE are the good fruit.

As Paul says later in 1 Corinthians, each of us has been given gifts. The StrengthsFinder approach calls these gifts “talents”. We all have innate talents. **A talent becomes a strength when the talent is combined with skills and knowledge**¹. An accountant and a brain surgeon both are talented, but having innate talent does not mean an accountant would be a good brain surgeon. And certainly, the brain surgeon could gain the skills and knowledge to be an accountant, but accounting would not be a strength in this way of strengthening because the skills and knowledge were not combined with innate talent.

Taking the time to find out what our talents are, our innate gifts, allows us to find the skills and knowledge necessary for those talents to become strengths. And then we become like the wheat in the field - growing, fruitful branches of the Lord.

There is another element to our strengths as well. Our talents and strengths are beautiful. When our family drove out to Yellowstone National Park, we took a detour up to Pierre, South Dakota - really just because we wanted to see what it was like. There is really no place else like Pierre. It is in the middle of rolling hills. We were there in the middle of the summer and those rolling hills were covered with acres and acres of flowing fields of wheat. The breeze would blow through and you could hear the wheat fruit rustle all around you. I thought it would be dull and unearthly there, but it

¹ *Living Your Strengths*. Albert Winseman, Donald Clifton, Curt Liesveld. New York, NY: Gallup Press. 2003,4. pg 8.

wasn't - it was incredibly beautiful. And this is the way I believe God and Christ intend our lives to be - beautiful, flowing, sensitive expressions of our God-given talents.

How does this apply to our parable? Well, for your personal life, it means focusing on what your innate talent is, or if you do not know, finding out what that talent is, and letting it grow. This means trusting, like the Master in the parable, that your talent will grow into a strength when you find the knowledge and skills to help that talent grow. This means **not focusing** on your weak points of your skills, knowledge, and even character. There is a risk here, and the risk is that your weaknesses may occasionally pull you down. But the idea is that the fruit of what the Lord has planted will grow in strength *because of the challenge of the weeds, of the weaknesses*. In fact, it may be that, if your focus is on what you are talented at and strengthen it, you might even turn the weeds into something useful. And by the way, none of this is age-specific.

What about those weeds, though? Well, let's talk about other people again, shall we? Think about the culture we are living in right now. We live in what some pundits and intellectuals like to call the *Age of Offense*. You are offended by what I say, and the tribe you are a part of will back you up when you offend me. Likewise, I am offended by what you say, and my tribe will back me against your offense. This behavior is pretty cut and dry in America right now. One side is absolutely wrong, and my side is absolutely right, right? You might even lose your job if you say the wrong thing about the other tribe, who are so offended they convince your boss you do not deserve your job. Time is of no consequence here: it could have been yesterday, or 7 years ago. Worse, your tribe might turn on you if you do not conform to the correct understanding that is tacitly required.

In this culture of offense, we are the ones responsible for uprooting the evil among the good. We are the ones who have determined when the harvest is and what will be harvested. But what does Jesus say? What does the master say in the parable?

“Just leave the weeds there. They are the concern of the reapers and the reapers will handle the weeds. You just care for the field.”

Or to translate into Jesus’ perspective, *“You are the good seed, the children of the kingdom. **The ones who appear to be evil are not your concern.**”*

Let me say that again: *“The ones who are evil are not your concern!”*

I will add to what Jesus says here. When our conflict is filled with vitriol and the potential threat of violence, we are in the presence of the Evil One. John Lewis, who died yesterday at 85 years old, when he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this. Matching vitriol and violence with vitriol and violence serves the wrong master. What changed minds in the civil rights marches was not just non-violent resistance, but the constant image of marchers building one another up and encouraging each other. Not all conflict is bad; some conflict leads to good outcomes, and hopefully most conflict leads to a better situation. But when vitriol and violence and absolute positions are aligned, then so is the evil one with the work of rage and hate. To put it another way, we are attempting to harvest and do the work that is not our work to do.

Whose work is it then?

Who does Jesus say the ‘reapers’ are? He says they are angels. The angels are responsible for the harvesting of the weeds. The angels are responsible for the judgment of those who are evil. I could say this a hundred times and it still would not be enough: ***determining who is evil and who is wrong is not our work when we are committed to a life in Christ.***

I will go one step further: participating in the cultural separation and polarization is not our work when we are wondering what Jesus would have us do relative to the world right now. Somehow, we still have to figure out how to love our neighbor even as we are loved, even in chaos and crisis.

When Jacob has his dream of the ladder of heaven, notice the direction of the angels. Jacob says it differently than we might think of things. He says, “I

saw angels *ascending, then descending the ladder.*” The angels are not coming from heaven to here. The angels are going from here to heaven. The work of the angels is here on earth.

And what is the work of the angels?

Jesus says, *The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40 Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age (Mt 13:39-40).*

Dealing with the evil one and those who would choose to follow the evil one is the work of the angelic realms.

What, then, are we supposed to do?

As Paul says, we are to build one another up. Speak well of one another. Seek out the talents of others and strengthen them. Sure, people will do wrong against you and others. We are to call that out, and then, once called out, we return to our true work - growing ourselves and others into fruitful, growing, beautiful, love-filled bundles of wheat.

Sometimes, we call this attitude non-judgment, but I think of it more as making a personal decision to continually judge for and toward the sake of the good and the true and the beautiful. Once we commit to this way and recognize what is our work and what is the work of the angels, following Jesus becomes a discipline of the spiritual self, a discipline of working on ourselves, not others. Our work is to become a judge of ourselves and continually choose that which builds up and strengthens the talents the Lord has given us and to seek those talents and strengths in others.

Ram Dass, the great spiritual teacher who died last December, puts it this way:

When you go out into the woods and you look at the trees, you see all these different trees. And some of them are bent...you sort of understand that it didn't get enough light, and so it turned that way. And you don't get all emotional about it. You just allow it. The minute you get near humans, you

lose all that. And you are constantly saying “You are too this, or I am too this.” That judgment mind comes in. And so I practice turning people into trees. Which means appreciating them just the way they are.

The way we might put this as followers of Christ is, no matter what we think of another person’s politics and views, Jesus calls us to find our own and another person’s talent and strengths. Once we find those, we build them up. We speak to their talent and strengths, and when we speak to others about that person, we speak of their talents and strengths.

If we care at all about the things of our faith, we will, for the love of God and the love of neighbor, do that which we are called to do and, we will, for the love of God, ***let the angels do their work.***

If we believe these things and act upon them, then we will, with the saints of heaven,

shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father (Mt 13:43).

Those who have ears, let them hear!

Amen.