

Readings: Gen. 28:10-19a, Matt. 13:24-30

word count 1,724

Jean is a grandmother, though she has not met her grandchild last I knew. Nor can she visit her daughter. Her family and friends have shunned her for her decision to leave the Church of Scientology over a dispute that she wasn't quite able to make clear to me, though it made her fearful. The whole circumstances were cloudy. Still, forcefully removed from the apartment where she once lived close by to her daughter on L. Ron Hubbard Way in Hollywood, Jean now had all of her belongings in a van, which she parked next to my church in Los Feliz one day. She was in her late sixties. After sleeping outside in the vehicle, she came into my office to introduce herself one morning. Jean asked me if there was a place where she could wash up and cook a simple meal. I gave her access to our facilities for the day, and suggested that she come to church and let people get to know her.

Through our Hope-Net food pantries, she was able to find food. After the first Sunday at church, a few of the people I let know about Jean, talked with her. An informal leadership meeting ensued afterwards. We could not offer her a home, but we could give her the assistance we were able to. Jean began to prepare meals in the kitchen in the church basement, where she also did some personal care in the adjacent bathrooms. She was a little afraid at first, but grew more outgoing with time. She resisted finding help to get a new apartment, insisting that she would do it on her own, though she did ask for the church's address to become her mailing address.

Although we had caretakers living on the premises, she took to cleaning the area that she was allowed to use. Juan and Irene, our caretaker family, were very hesitant at first, until they saw the work she was doing, and recognized that Jean was also guarding the back of the building, which they could not see from the church apartment. Jean earned a key to the downstairs.

When a wave of graffiti hit our newly painted church building, Jean asked where she could find the touch-up paint, and I arrived at church one day to find her painting the entire side of the building, right up to the eight-foot high trim. She expressed irritation with the people who had done this to our church, and her guiding motivation was to do what needed to be done—she had not done it so that we would thank her. She made this clear.

Jean had been coming to eat at our Senior Lunch program, which we ran in partnership with the Assistance League, but it had been de-funded and closed shortly after she arrived. Jean talked with me about getting more food-pantry items so that the seniors living on Social Security alone would still have a place to come to for a simple meal. We tried it for a while, and she made sandwiches and hot soup, with coffee and pitchers of cold water at each table in the church dining room. After a while, though, some of the former regulars became uncomfortable being fed by a woman who was far worse off than they were, and they stopped coming. I know that this made Jean sad, but she did not want to talk about it.

After a time, she came to me again in my office and said, "You have all been most kind, and now it is time for me to go. I cannot keep taking your hospitality." I learned from my Lutheran colleague two blocks away that she had moved her van into their church parking lot and was essentially doing the same thing there, though her mail still came to our church.

One day, wearing crisp clothes and a new haircut, Jean showed up on a Sunday at church. People were glad to see her. Privately, she told me that she needed to see me about her mail. She showed me a new address, and I asked her what had happened. Jean had saved every penny she could from Social Security checks and the occasional odd job, and had the first, last & security

deposit for a new apartment. Her life was changed. But so was ours...for being there as a church, and seeing close up just how lives can be changed. We are imperfect people behaving imperfectly... but with the sense that we occupy a seat within a great mystery, and that mystery is where we make connections with our fellow travelers on the path.

Jean is one of many people to whom I am grateful to for the gift of a face with which to attach to the decades-long issue of homelessness in America. I remember the self-named Dr. B., an ex-addict who helped run our food-pantry at the Presbyterian church, who was quick to help with anything that needed doing. Isadora volunteered at our thrift shop and at the pantry at First Christian Church, and she was engaging and lovely. She volunteered, I discovered at her retirement from fifteen years of service, because she had been homeless for a couple of years, raising two daughters as best as she could.

When we become involved in the lives of others, whether living in cars on the streets nearby, or in poverty anywhere around the world, we are the ones who are enriched. By becoming personally connected, we can talk to, rather than talk about. It is in “talking to,” that real knowledge is found in prophetic voices and poignancy; pointing to the underlying issues that keep us operating within systems that create poverty, hunger and injustice.

This morning I showed you a clip from “Family Promise,” an organization that helps families with children move from homelessness into permanent, or at least transitional housing. We will show it again right after church. I am hoping that I can take the names of some of you here who might attend a training session during the week of August 21, so that we can partner with our sister UCC Church of the Foothills, to support them with volunteers during the year as they house some families in transition between homelessness and a permanent place. Maybe you can help kids with homework or prepare a meal—there are many ways we can be healing forces in our community.

When I come back this September, I will be engaging the church in moving to learn more about what it means to be a Global Mission Church, with our eye to discovering what small parts we can play to create a more just and sustainable world. Our Adult Ed and Advocates for Peace and Justice will partner in this, with the Rev. George Johnson teaching a class for us this January. Our youth are leaving for a mission trip in the bay area of an ecological nature in just a couple of weeks. I will miss being with you, but look forward to what is ahead starting very soon.

Jacob was an imperfect person. In fact, that is an understatement. He pretty much had to leave home after creating some of the soap opera that he lived. But one night, he came to a certain place and dreamed dreams of a ladder that moved up to heaven. In that dream it was revealed that he was filled with grace he did not deserve, but he was loved and cherished. Jacob woke from that dream with a sense of reverence and awe for all that was around him, and it moved him to change. What he experienced was a sense of profound mystery, and in that mystery he found connection.

In his book, *Beyond the Worship Wars* (Alban Institute, 2001), Tom Long, a friend and recent visitor to IUCC, set out to research what makes for excellence in worship. He reports that he talked to lots of people around the country and studied 20 local congregations that most observers would agree are thriving. Although their worship styles range all over the spectrum, he found some common denominators. His list includes such qualities as warm hospitality, excellent music, the importance of the spoken word, and a church’s commitment to mission outreach. Number one on Tom’s list, though, is that all these thriving churches “make room, somewhere in worship, for the experience of mystery.” Their leaders realize, in other words, that worship is a place — *perhaps the place par excellence* — where human beings encounter the presence of the source of creation, and who come, expecting to be touched, somehow, by the divine presence.

Once knowing that we are all a part of that creation, the next step is to engage fully and wholly with each other and with the world; “Loving wastefully,” as Bishop Spong said when he was here. It only makes sense that we as a church continue to find ways to make connection with people here at home, and throughout the world, with a bold sense of mission.

Jesus told a parable about the good seed and the weeds. In the end, we are not the ones to judge. But we are the ones whose experience of a life shared in both healthy community and personal relationships are therefore challenged to know, understand, struggle with and ultimately change, this world as we can. Helping bring one family closer to calling a place, “home,” or assisting a community far away to learn some basic fundamentals of education, how to bring clean water to a village, or how to avoid risks to health. Providing a welcoming church for those who cannot find one elsewhere. These are the natural outward steps learned from an inner search for our common spiritual connection.

I want you to know that I am very grateful for being able to take this time off. I will return on September 7 for a Pastor’s Potluck, and will join you in worship to commemorate the tenth anniversary of 9-11 on the day itself, Sunday, 9-11. I am very much looking forward to being back with you then, while cherishing this time to rest, read, rejuvenate, and hopefully travel a little bit.

If I don’t say it enough...I love this church...I love you all...and you are always with me.

Scripture for Sunday, July 17, 2011

Gen. 28:10-19a

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.

Matt. 13:24-30

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.”