

Reflection for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost
“Special” People *by Rev. Dr. Alan Brehm*

As a child, most of us were raised on the great North American myth. The one where you’re told that you can be anyone you want to be and do anything you want to do. It’s the myth that I’m “special.” Now, I don’t mean “special” in the sense of having a healthy sense of one’s uniqueness and value.

I mean “special” in the sense of having special privileges, special benefits, special advantages. I think one of the hardest lessons in life for those of us raised on that myth is to come to grips with the reality of life.

The reality is that each of us is born with a set of circumstances, a genetic inheritance, a personality that, try as we may, we can no more change than a leopard can change its spots or a zebra its stripes. I think my generation especially has had great difficulty accepting the reality that I’m not “special.”

It seems to me that religious perfectionism thrives on the desire to be “special” in God’s sight. In fact, I think that’s putting it mildly. I’d have to say that religious perfectionism is positively obsessed with being “special.”

To some extent, it's an obsession whose seeds are planted early in the biblical narrative. In a very real sense, the stories about the patriarchs and matriarchs are all about the idea that the children of Abraham and Sarah are special. God promises them special blessings—they will be so numerous as to be “like the dust of the earth.” They will be given a “land flowing with milk and honey,” a land that belongs to other nations.

With that kind of outlook in the very beginning of the Bible's story, it's no wonder that religious perfectionists throughout the ages have sought to lay claim for themselves on God's special attention and blessing.

Religious perfectionists have used all kinds of strategies to guarantee that they get to be “special” people in God's sight. One of those strategies is reflected in the parable from our gospel lesson for today: making it all about “us” against “them.” It's a parable that is difficult to understand, and perhaps it may have been tampered with to make a point.

The community Matthew was writing for was probably struggling with the fact that, though they were Jewish, they had been thrown out of their synagogues. Now they were probably

feeling displaced and struggling to justify themselves in the face of rejection. The parable itself seems to talk mainly about the difficulty of separating good from evil in this world. That would be a point that is consistent with Jesus' teaching—that it is difficult if not downright impossible to accurately judge another person's motives and actions.

It would seem that, in the hands of Matthew's church, that story turned into a means of supporting an "us" against "them" mentality: they are the "wheat" that will one day be harvested and gathered into God's barns, while their enemies are the "weeds" that will one day be gathered up and burned.

It's a strange text. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that God gives the blessings of sun and rain to all alike. Here, however, he tells a parable about separating the "children of the kingdom" from the "children of the evil one." When you look at what Jesus says elsewhere, this parable about "us" against "them" stands out like a sore thumb.

You may find it hard to believe, but religious perfectionists use this still today to support their "us" against "them" mentality.

I heard this reflected in a recent BBC interview with Jerald O'Brien, a leader in the Aryan Nations organization in the Pacific Northwest. He believes that he and all "Aryans" are "the children of God," the true descendants of Israel, while others, especially the Jewish people, are "children of Satan." Of course, that means anyone he doesn't like, including President Obama, is Jewish, and therefore a "child of Satan."

Now, when we hear someone like that, we can all agree that it takes a lot of nerve to think you can confidently identify another person as a "child of Satan!" Or perhaps in this case at least a few screws loose.

But unfortunately we are not immune from the desire to be "special" when we hear this parable and its allegorical interpretation. Who among us doesn't assume that we are the wheat and "they," whoever they may be, are the weeds.

We all tend to approach a parable like this one and assume that we are the favorites, we are the chosen ones, we are the "children of the kingdom."

But the plain truth of Scripture is that in God's sight all people are loved and valued. There is no such thing as

“special” people in God’s realm, in the sense of having special privileges.

God does not single anyone out for special attention or blessings. God gives the blessings of sun and rain, compassion and care, to all people on earth alike.

All people are God’s children—both by virtue of creation and redemption—and our faith and our way of life and our outlook on other people ought to be consistent with that basic truth.

Let us pray...

O God of Jacob,

you speak to your global family in the light of day

and in the dark of night

when our sleeping is filled with dreams of heaven and earth.

May the story of Jacob's vision

remind us to be open to your spirit of truth and hope,

ready to discover your presence in our midst.

We pray this in your life-giving name. Amen.