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St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Proper 11 (A) – 19 July 2026
Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

None of the Above

Let us pray:

*God of all mercy, we confess that we have sinned against you, opposing your will in our lives. We have denied your goodness in each other, in ourselves, and in the world you have created. We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. Forgive, restore, and strengthen us through our Savior Jesus Christ, that we may abide in your love and serve only your will, **Amen.***

Almost every week, we pray these or similar words of Confession as we prepare to receive Communion. This is an important part of the liturgy, and we do not omit it lightly: Before coming to the Table, we must pause to acknowledge, before God and one another, that we are, in fact, human.

That we are, in fact, flawed.

That we are, in fact, not always in the right – no matter how much we might want to be.

No matter how much we might try to convince ourselves that we are.

If taken seriously, the Prayer of Confession is a public act of humility. It grounds (or, as the Brits say, it “earths”) us. It reminds us that we are not God...which is a Very Good Thing. That's an important corrective.

Confession also can be liberating, as we lower the mask we wear out in the world – the mask of perfection, or competence, or whatever unrealistic expectations we hold for ourselves.

Let it go...

Make peace with the fact that you, and I, and everyone we've ever met is a mess.

When all is said and done, we are really quite ridiculous. We parade around in front of each other as if we've got it all together...when that couldn't be further from the truth.

We all sin. Let's get next to that, shall we? As you've probably heard me say before, sin is not a four-letter word...

Sin is not a four-letter word.

So here's the question: If we *all* mess up, if we *all* miss the mark, then why do we have such a tough time admitting it?

Is it just that we have such fragile egos that we don't want to see ourselves as less than perfect?

Maybe.

And... There may be more at play here than insecurity.

We humans can be pretty harsh to each other. As a people we don't always make it safe to make mistakes. Or – dare I say it – to acknowledge sin.

I'd love for you to take a second now, please, to think back on a time when you really messed up and could not bring yourself to come clean. When you did – or failed to do – something, and someone else got hurt, as a result. Even if you were never “caught,” that action or inaction had a consequence...somewhere, somehow.

What prevented you from owning up to it?

Did you worry what people would think?

Were you concerned about your reputation?

Were you afraid of the consequences?

Did you expect retribution?

I invite you just to sit with that memory for a moment.

Does it feel heavy?

Mine does, too. It weighs on me. Mightily.

I imagine that Jacob's memory of misdeeds is heavy for him, as well — as heavy as the stone under his head as he drifts off to sleep. Last week we heard how Jacob cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright. Unfortunately, between that episode and today's passage Jacob has struck again: He has tricked his father into giving him the blessing meant for Esau.

Why does this matter? Can't Isaac bless both of his sons? Not exactly: In the ancient Near East, a blessing from one's father was like being named in a will; it was a legally binding transfer of rights and authority.

What Jacob did is really bad. It's treacherous. He has schemed, he has lied, he has manipulated his old, blind father.

It is difficult to see how any of this can be redeemed.

So Jacob's mother, Rebekah, has sent him away, for his own safety. (She's Esau's mother, too, but she seems to forget that part...And here you thought *your* family was dysfunctional!) Having lost everything, Esau wants revenge. A skilled hunter, he's out for blood.

Sin is rampant.

Relationships are shattered.

Forgiveness seems impossible.

Jacob is alone, on the run, in this liminal place, somewhere between Beer-sheba and Haran.

And lo and behold, *this* is where God shows up. *This* is where God tells Jacob, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

"I will not leave you."

Very interesting...

Please don't misunderstand me: Jacob is *not* innocent here. So far in the story, he has done pretty much everything wrong.

And in the eyes of his family, and of his community, in the tradition of his people, the options seem pretty clear:

Either A) Jacob stays to face his brother's retribution, or

B) he lives out his days in exile and isolation.

But suddenly there's a third possibility, Option C:

"None of the above."

That answer always used to confuse me on the SATs. Things are either one way or the other, right? Yes, or no? True, or false?

But God says, *None of the above*.

*My thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways (Is. 55:8).*

Jacob's vision drives the point home. It is mystical, otherworldly. His dream points toward another plane altogether.

It suggests – poetically, artistically – that what we see is *not* all there is.

It also suggests that God understands something about us that we ourselves are so often reluctant to admit:

We humans make mistakes.

We sin.

We oppose God's will in our lives.

We deny God's goodness in each other, in ourselves, and in the world God has created.

God knows all of this...*and* God loves us.

God is with us and will not leave us.

As the Psalmist asks,

*Where can we go from God's Spirit;
where can we flee from God's presence?*

The answer, plainly, is that we can't. It's that simple.

Yet, for whatever reason, somehow we try to hold ourselves and everyone else to a higher standard than the one God holds for us.

God will not abandon us, but we have no problem abandoning, cutting off, rejecting one another.

Just who do we think we are, anyway?

We make it unsafe to be real, to be honest.

We tend to leave very little room for forgiveness, or redemption.

As a result, we've created a world in which it is difficult to tell the truth about our own shortcomings.

And so we pretend that we are something we're not. We hide out, out of fear. We live in exile from one another, and from God.

It's pretty clear that this is *not* God's vision for us.

That seems to be the whole point. God just wants us to come home.

In his book *Just Mercy*, lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson writes this:

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done...An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others...we all need mercy, we all need justice, and — perhaps — we all need some measure of unmerited grace.¹

¹ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: One World, 2015), 17-18.

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

We all need some measure of unmerited grace.

God will not leave us.

These things are true of you, and of me, and of everyone we have ever met and will ever meet.

So let us cultivate understanding, and forgiveness, and compassion in the little patch of ground we are called to tend.

Let us make it safer for our family and friends and coworkers to be human – to admit their mistakes, to seek forgiveness, and to find reconciliation.

Let us acknowledge that we are imperfect, too...as difficult as that may be to admit.

And let us reject the false dichotomy of either A) We are completely with flaw or sin *or* B) We are inherently crooked and irredeemable.

The correct answer is C) None of the above.

We are flawed, *and* God is with us.

We sin, *and* God loves us.

May we, in God's own time, learn to live in that truth.

Amen