7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.19.20

Genesis 28:10-19a
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." 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; but the name of the city was Luz.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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.' " [36] Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." [37] He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; [38] the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, [39] and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. [40] Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. [41] The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, [42] and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. [43] Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen! (649)

I got an anonymous email a couple weeks ago. Through the Monterey church website, it read, “Liz Goodman needs to extricate herself from this town.” It struck a blow, a glancing one. It

felt like an attempt to be menacing, and that's how it landed with me—menacing. My first time ever receiving something like this, it didn't feel *good*.

It also didn't feel quite *right*. I think my correspondent chose the wrong word. I think what he or she meant to say is, "Liz Goodman should *eradicate* herself from this town," or even, "Liz Goodman should be eradicated from this town."

Extricate? That sounds like something I would do for my own sake, like to get out of a circumstance that was about to be too much, too complicated, too entangling. So, maybe this was someone looking out for me…? Encouraging on me some "self-care" …?

Eh, probably not. I think what was meant here was that I should be made gone—and it would be peak English teacher to write back asking about word choice, and I haven't been an English teacher for sixteen years now, so I decided not to do that.

I just tossed the email in my computer trash bin—to eradicate it from my life, but not without understanding. I get it. The urge to eradicate what's judged bad is real and runs deep, especially among religious types, which I'd guess this person is: "religious." To eradicate, to root out: this is a deeply human urge, and it's excited by religious thinking. Those who seek to be righteous; those who aim for divination, holiness: these are going to be particularly prone to wanting to root out what's judged as standing in the way of that project.

And clearly there are things that stand in the way of this project, right? Something here is wrong. Something here is *very* wrong. Surely, this is what Jesus meant by imagining an enemy who has sown bad seeds among us. Surely, this is to indicate that something here has gone very wrong, is not accordance with God's will. So, to my would-be helpful correspondent, things are already complicated for me, thank you very much. Things are complicated for us all. Your advice, then, to extricate comes a little late.

But that's the way of the world. It's even the way of the world as regards life in the church. There's no guarantee there won't be the likes of bearded darnel wherever you go. In fact, you should be prepared for the possibility that there *will* be as bearded darnel wherever you go, that you yourself might be as bearded darnel.

Bearded darnel: that's the specific weed Jesus spoke of in this parable, which I don't know anything about but about which biblical scholar Talitha Arnold seems to know a lot. In one commentary I read on the matter, she explains that this weed has "no virtues. Its roots surround

the roots of the good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks like wheat, until it bears seeds"—seeds which, if eaten, can cause hallucinations, can even be fatal.

So, forget that the wheat and these weeds are tough to extricate from one another. They're difficult to tell from one another: they even look alike, though apparently the darnel, when mature, stands up a little taller and a little straighter than mature wheat does, its flower less heavy so less causing of it to droop.

(It's very exciting when your metaphor works so perfectly.)

Matthew is the only gospel writer who remembered Jesus to have told this parable. Unlike last week's parable, which is in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), this one is only in Matthew. What's more, another biblical scholar, Matt Skinner, who teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary, said he starts his course on the Gospel of Matthew with this parable because it is so very Matthean, so emblematic of our writer, "Matthew's" concerns, so very much reflective of "Matthew's" anxiety.

The writer, whom I'll call Matthew, since that's what the book title implies we can do, likely lived in Antioch, the largest city in Syria and the third largest in the Roman empire. It was, therefore, as urban and diverse as you'd expect a big city to be. You never knew who you'd bump into, or with whom you'd be neighbors. Moreover, you never knew who would show up in church.

Like, when I was in the choir at Memorial Church at Harvard, when I was in divinity school there. The church, and its intimate chapel, was in the middle of Harvard Yard, which is literally a gated place. I'd be there every morning, in my wool choir robe, which seemed a strange combination of spotless and age-old, as if it had been around forever but was also untouched by the human hand. Black and crimson. Perfect. As such, I nevertheless sat next to more than a few people who appeared homeless. One, I later learned, was actually a Nobel laureate. He just couldn't be bothered with the nonsense of civility.

In a city, you never know whom you're rubbing elbows with. That's one of things I loved about living in a city, and that I miss.

Actually, I miss rubbing elbows at all.

Matthew was a little less comfortable with this likelihood. It seems, in fact, to have made him anxious. Prof. Skinner considers Matthew's gospel the most anxious one, and this parable

exemplary of that anxiety. Though all the gospel narratives are products of social trauma—the contemporaneous destruction of the Temple and leveling of the Holy City—this one seems to simmer with more general unease, as if Matthew was never sure of what company he was keeping, of who would show up among his congregation.

But congregations are like that. An uneasy mixture of settled and spontaneous, congregations meet as a mixture of exactly those whom you'd expect and ever the possibility of someone new and unknown. And who knows what odd assortment of ideas and life choices those people show up with? To be honest, this was the most unnerving aspect of my first several years of leading congregational worship: I had to prepare what to say with only sort of knowing among whom I'd be saying it. Meanwhile, our larger culture was (as ever) a veritable dashboard of hot buttons. 9/11 and the War on Terror? The War in Iraq and the War on Drugs? Climate Change? Gay rights?

As for "Matthew," he was very likely a Jewish-Christian writing for a congregation of Jewish-Christians. This is to say that his was a congregation not yet filled with Gentile converts, which, of course, the church would eventually become—an entirely Gentile enterprise. But Matthew's community wasn't there yet.

Several things lead us to this conclusion. First, unlike in the Gospel of Mark, which Matthew used as a foundational text, this gospel references a lot of Jewish custom but never bothers to explain these customs. It's as assumed that the intended audience of this book already knew about Jewish custom.

Second comes in contrast with this book and Luke's narrative. In Luke's gospel, which was written around the same time as Matthew and uses of much of the same source material, Jesus' lineage is traced back to Adam, the storied father of all humankind. Matthew traces Jesus' lineage only back to Abraham, the storied father of Judaism.

Finally, the material that only appears in this gospel, and thus is likely from Matthew's own community, is the only place where there's reference to an *ecclesia*, the Greek word translated "church," which is to say an organized group with rules for keeping order. No other gospel imagines such an establishment, such an organization. Matthew does, though, which suggests an aim for regularity among this new movement, suggests that this community was strict in keeping the Jewish law. In fact, they seem (judging from the text) to hold that they must exceed the scribes

and the Pharisees in "righteousness," which would be a matter of adherence to Jewish law. They were trying to be better Jews than even the professional Jews.

Taken together, all these things point to Matthew as writing for a living and changing community, though also with a deep sense of tradition and even correctness.

So, no wonder the anxiety—because things were changing, and quickly. In a matter of a couple decades, this once Jewish enterprise, with Gentile outcroppings, would become an entirely Gentile enterprise, with only its foundation in Jewish custom and culture. Actual Jews would be all be eradicated (or were they extricated?) from the ecclesia, the church.

Meanwhile, Matthew wrote for a congregation with the aim of holding it all together—the long-faithful Jews, the newly converted Gentiles.

Who, speaking of: were they taking over the congregation? Were they starving out all the good Jews, who had deep knowledge of these things, institutional memory and a sense of orthodoxy?

And, about all of them, were they using their familiarity with custom and the way things should be as a means to keep newcomers out? Were they tangling everyone up in their snagging, ensnaring law?

Yeah, really, what about those others?

They aren't like us.

They aren't operating in good faith.

Matthew's hope that the church might be an assembly in which Jews and Gentiles could flourish together was likely fading before his eyes because age-old fissures weren't going to disappear so quickly. Time-tested conflicts weren't going to melt away simply because a new doctrine had been put forth, and now everyone could be friends—because you never know what those other people are actually thinking. You never know what's actually going in someone else's heart, behind that someone else's face. Sure, they might look like wheat, but bearded darnel does look like wheat, it just stands up taller and straighter.

Who here is with us, and who's actually against us?

This need to judge, and ability to judge, has been a problem as regards us from the beginning, at least according to scripture. This, our need to judge what's good from what's bad (as a matter of survival!) and this, our capacity to judge what's right from what's wrong (a capacity

God-given and refined as wisdom): the Bible features this as a recurring concern going all the way back to our storied beginning, when, having eaten of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, we humans now knew this good and evil—that there are such things as good and evil, that they are to be differentiated from one another, separated out, though we can't always tell the difference, or can't ever fully tell the difference, or either way we can't separate the two apart.

Our knowing, then, about these two opposite characteristics doesn't help us much, and maybe hinders us all the more. Consider, we humans are hardly ever as harmful as we are when we try to make a clean differentiation, when we try to separate out the evil from the good so to eradicate what's evil, to uproot what's bad. It's when we mobilize to get rid of all that's wrong that we ourselves become the doers of wrong. Behold, Nazism. Behold, the Soviets. Behold McCarthy. The Red Scare. The Yellow Menace. Etc. Etc.

This parable is strange because there's a higher good for us than the good. There's a higher good for us to perform than the good of providing for the growth of what's good. The higher good is trusting in God to do the work of judging and deciding what should be done about the presence of evil. The higher good (than the good) is trust, is faithful living and faithful waiting. Justice will be done: the Lord will do it. The good will be given rightful place: the Lord will see to that. Meanwhile, what's good for us to do is to let that be in faith.

This might be hard to take. After all, maybe you know well the old adage: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Edmund Burke said that, and he was smart! Actually, Edmund Burke is said to have said that. It was in fact a Baptist preacher from Nottingham, England in the early 20th century who said that Edmund Burke had said that. And now it's on bumper stickers, and so we all know it: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

(It's sort of a faithless thing for a Baptist preacher to have said, which may be why he said someone else said it.)

This parable suggests something quite different. This parable urges upon us greater faith.

Remember, the word that comes to us as "devil" finds it origin in Greek as *diabolos,* which is to throw apart, to separate, or to divide. And that word comes to us from the Hebrew, *ha-Satan,* which is to accuse or to slander. Remember, then, that it's the very act of separating one from another that is the evil we seek to deplore.

Our deploring what's deplorable is what's deplorable.

Hillary Clinton learned this lesson the hard way, God love her. (I know I do.)

For what it's worth, this seems to be a central lesson in Jacob's learning in the wilderness—this wilderness that would become the Promised Land. This is a central lesson, that even a place where you'd never guess God would be, lo, God is in that place, too, and you'd never have known it.

The real challenge of this parable is that it cuts to our very nature—for, given this as true, then what shall we do? For we must do something. We must decide and act. Our every moment of every day is about deciding and acting. Shall I eat this or that? Shall I do this task or that one?

And essential to this is a constant judging, a constant discerning. Would this be better to eat now, or that? Would this be good to do now, or not? Shall I talk with this person, or remain silent? Shall I seek clarity and understanding, or should I just let this go?

What's more, sometimes the stakes are very high. The health and happiness of our households, the viability of our congregations, the safety and responsibility of our whole country: there can be a lot at stake, which we as serious people might feel pressed upon to do something about.

What, though, would this parable have us do? And what would this parable have us *not* do? And can we live with that?

I'll tell you this, I carry this parable around with me, and it's like a pebble in my shoe—a discomfiting reminder, with every other step, "You might not be right. You might not be right." As I go along, as a I go along, "You might not be right. You might not be right."

"Listen to me," is often my way in the world. As a preacher, as a pastor, as a mother, as a member of this community of Monterey, of Lenox, of Berkshire County: "Listen to me. I have an idea. Here's what we should do," while this parable whispers to me, kindly, discomfitingly, "You might not be right. You might not be right."

The Holy Spirit acts. We as creatures of free will, and (by grace) good will, and (quite often) strong will, also act. Wisdom would have us know when to press and when to let up. The constancy with that question is the space of lived faith. It's complicated, and you might want to extricate yourself from it, and you might want to eradicate a few others while you're at it. Don't. Stay here, grow and intertwine, and trust the Lord is good.

Thanks be to God.