

8th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.23.23

Romans 8:12-25

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Matthew 13:24-30

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 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?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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.’ (468)

Bearded darnel is a mimic weed. It looks and behaves like wheat, is sometimes called wheat’s evil twin. But that’s not quite right because it’s taller than wheat, better looking, greater of flower than wheat. For this, it hides well among wheat because those flowers cause the stems to bend. Darnel bows coyly to wheat, its superior. Bearded darnel is a flatterer.

Neither tame nor quite wild, it has been insinuating itself into our crops for perhaps as long as we’ve been keeping crops. That is, when it’s not cultivated on purpose. See, in small doses, it’s intoxicating, which has its appeal. But in large doses, it can kill a person.

It has now largely been eradicated from the developed world. But it is supposed to have kept much medieval European peasantry in a state of wooziness. One Italian scholar argues in his book *Bread of Dreams* that peasants in 13th century Italy existed in a “state of semi-permanent

hallucination from bread adulterated with more malignant grains, which they may have sought as an escape from daily life.” Where it does still grow, it’s likely not on purpose. It yet manages to hide among crops in North Africa and in parts of Asia. One study found it made up almost ten percent of a wheat harvest in Ethiopia.

Darnel has also showed up in all sorts of literature. Ovid, the Roman poet of the 1st century, called darnel “eye-blightening.” Shakespeare wrote of it in *Henry VI, Part 1*, in *Henry V*, and prominently in *King Lear*, he who wears it in his crown, which the play notes is made up of “all the idle weeds that grow in our sustaining corn.” As it happens, Lear’s madness is symptomatic of darnel poisoning. This had one professor of biology and two of his colleagues in the humanities wondering if Shakespeare had meant to suggest that Lear had been eating the plants in his crown. These three write, “Where there is darnel, there is treachery and toxicity...”

Where there is darnel, there is treachery and toxicity.

Other literature darnel sneaks its way into: parables, namely this one.

We have entered the portion of our gospel narrative where Jesus will be heard to teach in parables. Matthew’s gospel is neatly arranged in this way. Jesus is in parts a preacher, most famously preaching his Sermon on the Mount, but elsewhere preaching shorter sermons. He is in other parts a parable-teller, stories that are less straightforward than the declarations of his sermons, not that these either are easy to figure out, still less easy to live by. Blessed are the poor in spirit? Really? Blessed are you when they persecute you? Really? Parables are a few degrees more difficult still—or better to say more disorienting. A parable isn’t meant to firm up one’s thinking, but to tease it loose. A parable isn’t to be instructive as much as deconstructive, an undoing of your assumptions while it undoes your known world, so to redo it so it resembles the impossible-though-irrepressible reign of God, upside down, inside out. Think again, says the parable. Are you sure, questions the parable?

See, whether declarative or suggestive, Jesus is impossible either way, as is the God whom he embodies amidst a world that would yearn for him and would also reject him.

On my week away at Horton Center, I went on a haiku hike, a light hike. Led midweek by a now-tired hike leader, this gave us reason to stop on some nearby overlooks, to sit for a while and compose some haikus. I wrote this one, which stemmed from my feelings about being there, in this long-beloved place, yet now during this staff-strapped summer, when I though felt my every attempt to lend a hand met with correction that I was doing it wrong.

You have no place here.

Would that you did. We need help.

You have no place here.

I realized, sitting on this ledge, feeling the mid-week slump where high hope had met with middling reality, and as I looked over to Chapel Rock where the whole camp meets for evening worship, that this was even more the case for Christ in the world:

You have no place here.
Would that you did. We need help.
You have no place here.

For what it's worth, things got better for me after this mid-week slump. I found my footing. I found my voice. Less so for Jesus in the world, I'm sorry to have to say—Jesus, whom we reject and reject, but who doesn't give up on us.

Matthew's gospel isn't the only one to remember Jesus teaching in parables. No, of course, all three synoptic gospels remember him doing so—all three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But Matthew is particular in his narrative for his remembering a lot of parables that seem told to ease anxiety, quite likely his own anxiety. That this whole earthly endeavor of following Christ is a terribly mixed affair: this resulted in what seems to be some anxiety on Matthew's part, of which people more knowledgeable than I have taken note. 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 what seems "Matthew's" particular anxiety.

It's likely our writer lived in Antioch, the largest city in Syria and the third largest in the Roman empire. This is to say it was 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.

But Matthew was himself likely a righteous Jew, someone for whom the world had been largely cordoned off, someone who likely felt himself to have clear guidelines about how to do this and with whom to do this, how to live a righteous life and with whom you could even hope to live a righteous life. The Law: the Law made it so much of all this was clear for this particular people.

In the city, though, you were surrounded by people who probably lived by other rules, or indeed by no rules. Really, you just never knew with whom you'd find yourself rubbing elbows. You never whom you might find yourself joined up with in church.

Which is what Matthew was writing for: the church. Indeed, he's the only gospel writer to imagine so distinctive a thing as "church." Yes, indeed, he's the only gospel writer to use a word for it— "church," *ekklesia*. None of the other gospels seem to assume a distinctive entity for what

Jesus would generate in the world. Mark speaks of the reign of God made present in Jesus, immediately present in Jesus. Luke speaks of a people gathered and made active by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. John speaks to and from a particular community of believers, which has come to be called the Johannine community. But Matthew understands this new dispensation as what has come to be familiar to all of us amidst history, the intentional church, a worldwide intended effort to cultivate following Christ, an all-embracing assembly (*ekklesia*) gathered with the explicit purpose of embodying the ever-living and ever-loving Christ. The church.

The thing is, this endeavor which Matthew alone among our four seems to urge onto the world, is also an endeavor that Matthew is most of all the four also anxious about.

And maybe that's because he's actually thought about it.

Maybe this anxiety is because he's actually imagined it all through.

Because once you've imagined it all through, you realize that everyone means *everyone*, though gathered into a project in which there are no obvious, evident, irrefutable, unchangeable signs or signals that we've got this exactly right. There's no way to prove, beyond any doubt, that someone is living actually according to Christ. There's no fixed evidence that someone is actually among the righteous, or that some gathering is perfectly enacting God's purpose. There is no law, as there was in the synagogues, that one could be measured against so to evaluate that one's effectiveness in living rightly. There is no set standard by which to establish the closeness or not-closeness to getting it all correct. There are no ideological purity tests. There are no measurements of the heart that might decipher whether someone is close in their following Christ, or way off. There aren't even set practices, other than breaking bread together and praying the Lord's prayer, both things Jesus is remembered to have said to do.

So, some standards. So, some rules. These the church has endeavored from time to time to establish. Our creeds, our scriptural canon, our orthodoxies and pieties: these are all attempts to nail a few things down, to nail a few things of this confessed, historic faith down, a phrase I use on purpose here, as Christ nailed down is both emblematic of this our need, and the final word rightly spoken about this our need. Having nailed him down, we meet a God who unbinds him and lets him go and then asks us to follow, as if this isn't going to cause us each and all the anxiety which Matthew first felt.

So, everyone is to be gathered into this godly endeavor, but there's no way to tell whether everyone is equally worthy or up to the task. Wheat? Check. Weeds? Bearded darnel? Check.

Yikes.

Have you seen that movie? Have you been that character? Your parents are away for the weekend, and you've got the house to yourself, and everyone at your high school finds out and descends with upon your lovely property with intoxicants ready to be uncorked, ready to flow or waft? And I mean not just your friends, that small, pre-approved circle. But *everyone*. The jocks. The freaks. Even the drop-outs!

Yes? You've seen that movie? You've been such an ill-prepared host?

You're gonna get in trouble.

Matthew finds himself throwing that party.

But not before Paul found himself doing the same—Paul, the apostle, who did it first. And what a shock it must have come as for him. Because he was the righteous Jew who set the standard and kept the standard, both for himself and for everyone else. A Pharisee, Paul was feared as such.

But then came this encounter with the Risen Christ, and then came a change of heart, and then came an understanding that the problems of this world can't adequately be addressed by a law, not even the most righteous, holy, clear and comprehensive law. No, for the problems of this world run deep and wide, run deeper and wider than just those evident among people and our politics of fear and violence. The problems are at play in the whole creation, anywhere that death is the cost of doing business, anywhere that the less powerful fall prey to the more powerful, which by the way is *everywhere*.

Darwin, to his credit and to much far-reaching benefit, discovered the merits of this way, the theory of evolution explaining the progress of life though at the expense of so much hopeless attempt and wasted life. Hitler then doubled down on this theory and said, "If it work in nature, then let's go with it, let's try it in politics, the weak being rightly killed off." Paul said the exact opposite: if people can hope for a sustaining peace, where life is the fuel for life, then so can the whole natural world—the creation itself set free from its bondage to decay and death. Once subjected to futility in the knowledge that the best any creature can hope for is a death not *too* painful and a life not *too* toilsome, now our hope is far greater than that.

Not seen, to be clear. This hasn't happened yet, I know. It's not even possible, I know. But that's what makes it hope.

Peace. Sustained and sustaining peace. Shalom, the lion lying down with the lamb, the wolf and the kid grazing together.

This won't happen through the law, not even a most comprehensive law. No law will ever make it so a lion is a better neighbor to a village full of children on the Serengeti plain, or a coy-

wolf is kinder to neighborhood cats, or a bear will become a respecter of chicken coops. That requires something far more radical. That requires something for more re-creative, or redemptive.

But that radical action isn't rightly ours to take. Not according to this parable, anyway.

Radical is related to eradicate. Radical is to uproot. And that's not action rightly ours to take. Not according to this parable, anyway.

Because, the fact is, we don't know. We can't tell. This is the tragedy suggested in the story of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Having eaten of it, the story suggests, we now know there's good and evil—but we can't tell them apart, not always, not reliably.

And then there's the terrible fact that, indeed, the action of eradicating is the very mode of the so-called devil, this one whose name means "to divide," making it so the action of dividing weeds from wheat is to do the work of the devil—this thing that we very likely mean to root out. To root out the bad is to engage the bad!

Ugh!

So, our once unknowing about anything but the good and sustaining is now a fuller knowing that the creation is far more mixed than all that. But to try to do anything radical about that is to do the work of the devil. So, we know just enough to be dangerous to ourselves and to others. Indeed, we are ourselves a mixed bag, though most of all when it comes to this, when it comes to ourselves, we are confused about which is which, and, more pressingly, what to do about it all.

Patience. Faithful patience—faithful in that assurance that God is at work in all things for good, faithful in the counter-evidential assurance that God's actions in the world are those which are always good and just, of which we can rest assured and also join in the gracious effort. The parable Jesus tells counsels patience, counsels faith and endurance as we make our way through this world where dandelion bows its flowering head to wheat's more stout, unimpressive goodness.

And it's one of the least practiced religious imperatives, if you ask me. This resistance of the urge to get rid of what we discern unlovely, to cast out what we judge to be un-right. No, for we want to fix it! Especially "religious people," this most particularly dangerous sort. But it isn't ours to fix—for we are too limited in our sight, and limited just enough in our impact to be, not always, but sometimes, both dangerous and ineffective.

The good news is that there is so much here to be loved. There is so much of this world, in our very midst, that is lovely and worthy of our admiration, cultivation, love—if we can but discern it.

When I was a girl I made an appointment with my pastor, Bill. I'd begun to ask questions that my parents decided to outsource. The nature of evil, its presence, its persistence: what? Why? And how can I cope with that?

I stood with Bill as he made bread in his kitchen. "Don't worry about it," was essentially his answer to me. "Train your attention on what is good," he more likely graciously said to me. Evil is as powerful in your life as your attention allows it to be.

Which isn't really the truth of it all. But it's true enough when it comes to the desperate plea of an otherwise quite lucky eight-year-old girl And it's true when it comes to any of us on any given Sunday when we continue in our yearning for the healing of the whole creation though while the creation is also spreading its splendor before us.

Something here is very wrong, goes a line from a poem I return to a lot. Yet more than a few things are very right, so very much so that even we might sense it.

Live amidst those things and watch them grow.

Thanks be to God.