

Genesis 28:10-19a and Matthew 13:24-30

Just this week, I was eating a little bit of lunch in our gazebo by the river... when over the bank, coming from High St. where the Haskells lives, tumbled a smallish black bear! He had a little spring in his step as he ambled down the ravine just across the river from where Jeff and I were sitting! He poked his nose in some holes in an old stone wall, he skipped along the ledge, then munched on some leaves that belonged to a little sapling...I wasn't sure if he was hungry or they just seemed to be in his way so he chomped them away...then off he went along the brook until he came to a downed tree that crossed the river to our side. Up he hopped and walked assuredly over and up....and then we couldn't see him anymore. We didn't see him come back down....maybe he went on up towards the Town Hall....who knows?!

What is the connection with this story and our texts this morning? I honestly don't know but I was captivated by this encounter with a bit of wildness. It was both a little fearful *and* endearing, perhaps like Jacob's encounter with God! This little bear tumbled into my life and I can't get him out of my mind, wondering where he is now!

Let us be in prayer: God that infuses the *all* of life, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

First, let's talk about "liars." Kathryn Matthews says that *Jacob's* lies are astonishing in their "breezy self-interest and greed." Before this text, Jacob had repeatedly reassured his poor, blind and suspicious father that he is not Isaac's younger son but his older, favorite son, Esau....In this very deceitful and conniving way, Jacob obtained his brother's birthright and a blessing from his father, Isaac. Jacob, this grandson of Abraham who was father to three major religions, lied.

His mother, Rebekah, still cherished him, however, and urged him to flee for his life from the wrath of this brother. She begged him to go 400 miles to his father's homeland to find a wife there...little did she know that it would be 20 years, multiple wives and many children before Jacob would return.

So Jacob takes off and was perhaps about 50 miles away from home when *this* "Jacob's Ladder" story takes place. He is tired, scared, probably hungry and alone.

Richard Pervo calls Jacob an immoral and irreligious rogue whom God would have to run to the ground...but that God is not without experience in *handling hard cases*.

In the story, as unscrupulous as Jacob was, he has a religious experience. There in the desert with his head upon some stones, God talks to Jacob in a dream and he finds himself going up and down a ladder to heaven. He hears God tell him *astoundingly* that he will be blessed for generations to come, that this land upon which he rests is holy, that he will be the father of many offspring who will reach out in all directions. God tells this rascal, that behold!, he and all his future family will be blessed. God tells him that no matter what, God will be with him and will "keep" him...care for him, protect him."

What kind of message does this story give to us and our society?

I think most people tell an occasional little bitty lie...maybe you tell someone you think their hair looks nice when really you don't...or you say you like a gift because you don't want to hurt someone's feelings except that you don't really like it at all. Most people tell little untruths... except my husband, Jeff. He has always been totally honest...he may come across as blunt, but you know that he means exactly what he says.

Anyway, we recoil from habitual liars... it is hard to trust anyone who lies...and yet in this story...God seems to see Jacob as part of a bigger picture...and aren't we all...part of a bigger picture? God loves us beyond the miniscule details... God moves us always towards wholeness, even through our imperfections.

Well, this is hopeful, isn't it? Perhaps it is a lesson for us to not give up on one another.

Jacob calls the place where he has had this religious awakening, Holy...a thin place, a liminal space where the sacred and the concrete merge. He calls it "Beth-el"... "The House of God." And yet, God moves. This Holiness is not stuck in one place or another... but moves and perhaps God just IS in all the places where life is.....even as we all have places that feel holy to us...our place on the river feels like that and now a little bear has blessed it! Where are your "holy" places, where do you sense a spiritual connection...and how does God *move* in your life??

Now let's get on to the weeds. What an image on the bulletin...it is a dandelion...dried and old, ready to let loose its seeds. Some photographer whom I do not know, has captured them in full light of the sun. Gorgeous. While some people poison dandelions with a passion...others see in them beauty and even healthy benefits.

I just read something about *purslane*...it is a creeping weed that many of us pull up ...but apparently it is rich in Vit. A and beneficial in all kinds of healthy ways. Perhaps wildflowers and even weeds have moved up in their reputations. They are good for pollinators like bees and butterflies... they are even beautiful to look at. Perhaps you read Pat Leuchtman's article in the Recorder about High Line Park in New York which is purposefully landscaped with the beautiful wildflowers, weeds and grasses that once inhabited roadsides and railways?

I blame riding lawnmower operators for clearing too much of these natural habitats.... God never intended for riding lawn mowers, certainly Adam and Eve never owned one...but why all the talk about weeds, anyway?

We have this little parable that is rather controversial. It is only told in Matthew and it goes like this: a farmer planted a crop but says that an "enemy" has come and planted weeds in between the wheat! When asked if he should remove the weeds, he is told to hold on because he may accidentally also pluck out the crop!

Talitha Arnold writes that the Biblical word for weeds was "tares." And that the tares they were talking about were most likely a plant called, "bearded darnel"...this is a very bad weed indeed whose roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water...but above ground it looks very much like the wheat except that its seeds can be deadly! Whew! There are weeds and then there are *weeds*, just like there are lies and then there are *lies*!

Unfortunately, the book of Matthew gets moralistic and adds a piece about gathering the bad weeds after the harvest, binding them up and burning them....and then says a favorite line found only in Matthew, that there will be grinding and gnashing of teeth...when all the bad ones are sent to be burned in hell!

If nothing else this parable can test our own notions about good and evil. There are certainly those who wish do to harm, or who take advantage of, or who enslave others with their policies...but life is much more complicated and nuanced. I believe Jesus tried to get us to understand this when he reached over the divides, constantly offering reconciliation, forgiveness and hope for people to turn their lives around...to reconnect with a sense of what is good and compassionate and life-giving.

So I am going to stretch this Biblical story a bit... On the 4th of July we had a jazz concert here with John Clark. He talked about "stretching out" the music. These musicians might start with a familiar tune, but they "stretch it out" through their improvisations and imaginations to turn it into something quite new.

This reminds me of the Jewish practice of mid-rash, where scripture was pulled apart and examined in new ways. I am thinking that Matthew's telling of this parable is rigid and can be looked at more holistically for our times.

I was listening to a wonderful interview with Krista Tippett and a Buddhist monk named Matthieu Ricard. He was born in France, he was a devoted scientist, but then decided to delve deeper into spiritual explanations of life...so he has become a Buddhist monk and an interpreter for the Dalai Lama.

He says that we must *cultivate* compassion. He said it takes practice and intention. But we are interdependent beings... if one suffers, we all hurt. This is where he appreciates the scientific notion that all life is in ecological relationship. He says we cannot live in a bubble.

So, we need to be careful that we do not pull out the wheat with the weeds, but we might show compassion for the value of those we deem unworthy. It is so easy to judge another...but all are of value in the eyes of God...even Jacob who lied through his teeth to get what he wanted!

All of us are vulnerable...but Jesus taught about a love that is transformative. A love that cultivates compassion....and helps us to see the deeper values....of even liars and weeds...I will close with this quote by Sister Corita, I think, who said, "How it improves people for us...when we begin to love them!"

Amen.