



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 7
Proper 11 (A)
July 19, 2020

**RCL: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23 or Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19; Romans 8:12-25;
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43**

Genesis 28:10-19a

In this passage from Genesis, Jacob has left the home of his parents, Isaac and Rebecca, in search of a wife. The circumstances of his leaving weren't ideal; having tricked been tricked out of his father's blessing, Esau is plotting to kill Jacob. Jacob leaves his home to avoid Esau's wrath and to start a new life in Haran, and on the way, he has an encounter with God. He dreams of a ladder that reaches from the earth all the way to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. God appears to Jacob and promises him the land on which he is lying and offspring as numerous as "the dust of the earth." God blesses Jacob and his offspring and promises to be with him wherever he goes. Waking from the dream, Jacob realizes that this is holy ground and he sets a pillar there to mark it. He recognizes this as a place where God's messengers move between heaven and earth, where God comes close. This holy encounter doesn't happen in Jacob's hometown or at his ultimate destination; it happens when he has just begun his journey, at an in-between place. God appears to Jacob at the portal between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown, and there, he finds a new place to worship God.

Many of us have been living in an in-between place these past months, with much of our lives turned upside down by the pandemic. We've been staying in our homes, displaced from our church buildings, and like Jacob, the circumstances of leaving our normal lives behind are not ideal. Yet, even as we move into this strange territory, we may find unexpected encounters with God. We are learning to worship God in new ways and in different places, and through it all, we are assured that God is with us.

- When have you found God in the "in-between" places?

Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23

The psalmist prays to God in a most familiar and intimate way. He is confident that God not only knows him but has searched him out. God sees even his most mundane actions of "sitting down" and "rising up," knows all his inner thoughts, and knows every word he speaks. Anywhere he might go, to the "uttermost parts of the sea," even in death, God is with him. His relationship with God is secure, constant, and very, very close. Yet, even so, the psalmist recognizes that God is beyond his knowing, that God sees things that

ne cannot see. What appears to be darkness to him is not dark for God. “Darkness and light to you are both alike,” he says, recognizing that God sees all, even in the dark of night. And still, the psalmist asks God to search his heart, to try him, and to “know [his] restless thoughts” to see if “there be any wickedness in [him].”

It takes courage to invite God to search our hearts to see if there is any wickedness in us. We might be afraid of what God might find there. Yet, just as the psalmist does, we can trust that by inviting God in, we are entering into deeper relationship with a loving God who knows us already, because God created us. God knows us and wants to be in relationship with us, wants to be close to us, just as we are, with God’s right hand holding us fast.

- How might you invite God into deeper relationship in your life?

Romans 8:12-25

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is writing to a community he had not founded and never visited. Yet, somehow, he seems to recognize their struggles, offer them wisdom, and proclaim to them a message of salvation for all. Paul’s letter was prompted by tensions that had arisen between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in Rome. The issues they disagree over, Paul says, are things of the flesh, while the values they share in common are of the Spirit. In his letter, Paul urges them to put aside their differences and to come together as one in Christ. He does this by recognizing all of them as children of God, all crying out to their Father - Abba. Paul extends his imagery of parenthood to all of God’s creation, which has “been groaning in labor pains until now” and is giving birth in them to the “first fruits” of this new creation in Jesus Christ. This new multi-ethnic community, this new kind of family of Jews and Gentiles together, confounds and upends the social status quo that maintains division between competing factions. Paul tells them that their community is, instead, the seed of reconciliation and hope for the liberation and salvation of all God’s children.

Tension and divisiveness are rampant in our world today. Sometimes, it seems impossible that people with different opinions or beliefs could ever come together. As Christians, we are called to something greater, beyond politics, beyond race, and beyond cultural identity, to work for reconciliation and love for all God’s children.

- Where do you find hope for reconciliation and love today?

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples with the parable of the weeds among the wheat and then, very clearly, explains exactly what he means by it. There is no need for us to guess what Jesus is talking about here, nor is there any way to soften his message or avoid the harsh judgment it contains. At the end of days, those who find themselves numbered among the weeds will be thrown into “the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Jesus is speaking in cosmic terms about God’s purposes and the very real presence of evil in the world. It is the “enemy” who plants the weeds among the

wheat. For a time, the good wheat and the evil weeds will live and thrive together in this world, until the coming of God's reign.

We may not be comfortable with judgmental parables like this one, but Jesus has an important lesson for us here about how to make choices in our lives. The seeds are sown either by Jesus or by the devil. The difference between them is their point of origin, out of whose hand they are planted. We may want to check our motivations to be certain about who plants us in the world and exactly what we are growing into. Jesus is urging us to join the company of "good seeds," the children of the kingdom, to help to build God's kingdom and make it fruitful.

- In our work to build the kingdom of God, how might some of the seeds we sow become wheat and others weeds?

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