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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Proper 11, July 19, 2020
Isaiah 44:6-8; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

What a time to begin our life together! The word “unprecedented” keeps coming up. It seems to capture the shock, the complete upheaval of this time we are living through. A few years ago, I wouldn't have dreamed that I would be standing in front of you today as your priest. And I certainly never dreamed that I would be standing in front of you for the first time as your priest in the middle of an unprecedented global pandemic. And at the same time, in the midst of the upheaval of facing the racism and inequity that plagues our country.

My classmates and I talked about this often as our final weeks in seminary were winding down. During our last zoom class of the year, our pastoral theology professor gave us time to talk about our fears. We talked about our sadness that our ministries were beginning in this time of social distance and mask wearing. We shared our worries that church might never be the same. We wondered if we were up to the task, a task that turned out to be very different from the one we thought we were embarking on. Like a good pastoral theologian, she listened and nodded and heard us. Then she said, “This is the time to which you are called. This is the time for which you were prepared.” My friends, this is the time to which we are called as the community of St. Barnabas. This is the time for which our life of faith has prepared us.

A few years before she died, my mother told me she had a favorite paragraph that always stuck with her. I thought that was strange – a paragraph? I could see a word or a phrase but a whole paragraph? Turns out it's a short one. My mom's favorite paragraph was the opening of Scott Peck's book, “The Road less travelled.” **Life. Is. Difficult.** Now my mom wasn't a

hopeless pessimist. In fact, she was a hopeful woman with deep faith in God. She was joyful, loving, outgoing. AND she raised 6 kids, had tons of grandkids, was married for almost 60 years. She loved life AND she knew the reality of life. She knew that this business of being human together can be hard.

So did the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah witnessed the fall of a nation, the captivity of a people. Isaiah knew the promises of God for fullness of life and yet watched God's people rebel over and over and over again against the life that God offered. In this morning's reading Isaiah urges the people to trust in God. The prophet declares that God is the rock of salvation, the strength and vision that will carry them through. The God of Isaiah is a God of love, of mercy and justice, a God of compassion. Isaiah warns God's people that there will be judgement – how they choose to live their life together matters. But Isaiah ultimately preaches restoration. God's desire is to restore all of humanity to peace and harmony and fullness of life. This is the time to which we are called. This is the time to trust in God, the rock of our salvation, even in the face of our turmoil. This is the time to know that God's vision is for peace and justice and fullness of life for all people. Isaiah doesn't sugar coat things. He knows that this business of being human together is difficult and that we have to be called back to God's vision again and again and again.

Jesus knew this, too. He uses parables to help the disciples envision the fullness of life that he calls the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus paints pictures and offers images and speaks in riddles to shake them out of their familiar habits and ways of seeing the world around them. Today, in the passage we hear, he uses wheat and weeds. On the surface this parable appears to be about judgement. In the end God will judge and gather in the righteous and banish the evil. But parables aren't meant to have one clear easy meaning. Jesus uses parables to go beyond our intellect deeper into our hearts. I wonder if this parable is also about identity. Who are we? Who

do we belong to? Will we accept God's rule over our lives and allow the seeds of God in us to produce wheat? Will we allow God to love us and form us into Kingdom people? Will we know deep down, even as the weeds threaten to take over, that God is the rock of our salvation?

Jesus isn't giving us a formula this morning. He is giving us **an invitation** – An invitation to the kingdom of heaven where it's not our job to worry about who's in and who's out. Instead, Jesus extends an invitation to each of us and to all of us together, to follow, to say yes to God's dream for creation and to live into that as best we can, even knowing that we are all a mixture of wheat and weeds. It's an invitation to follow Jesus who will give us what we need to battle the weeds and to stay healthy and strong.

The strength that Jesus preaches about, though, looks different than the strength our world preaches to us. The disciples would have heard that immediately in Jesus's words – they came from an agricultural society. They would have readily pictured the wheat and weeds Jesus talks about. It's harder for us to imagine what Jesus is saying. But they would have known that this darnel, the weed that Jesus is talking about, grows side by side with the wheat and looks almost identical to it. The difference is only obvious when the stalks mature. The ears of the wheat grow so heavy with grain that it makes the entire plant droop downward, but darnel, whose ears are light, stands up straight. So it's the ones standing straight and tall that are the weeds and it's the plant that bends in the wind that is the wheat of the kingdom of heaven.

We tend to think of standing straight and tall as strength. Stand tall in your convictions, be strong and don't bend. We say things like "Don't be a pushover." But today, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is not for those who refuse to bend but for those who like the wheat will bear such grain that their very nature is to bend. **What a beautiful image for us as we start our life together.** May we be people who are willing to bend toward one another. To listen to one

another and carry each other's burdens. May we strive to be people who bend toward our community – who listen to the needs of those around us and strive to lift up those who need lifting up. May we be people who don't rush to judgement from our high perch but instead bend gracefully to listen for understanding. May we be people who are willing to bend in new directions, to give birth to new ways of witnessing to the Reign of God in our midst.

As it turns out, my mom was right: This business of being human together is not easy. Being church in a time of pandemic and social unrest is a tall order. But this is our call. This is our time. And this is the moment that our life of faith has prepared us for. With God as our rock and Jesus's vision of the Kingdom may we lean in toward one another and together may we be a healing presence for a hurting world.