Genesis 28:10-19a

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Wish I could say I went somewhere exciting during my vacation: this was my first week back at church and I’m so happy to be back. But had I gone to an exciting place, it might have been New York City, where a play opened on Broadway last month called *Marvin’s Room.* You may know it. It was a film from twenty years ago based on the play of the same name. It has never played Broadway until now.

It tells the story of two sisters and their father, named Marvin, who is bed-ridden and dying. He has been bed-ridden and dying for 20 years. His crazy sister also lives there. She wears some kind of medical device that’s always opening the garage door. But the story isn’t about them. It’s about the sisters, now at mid-life, who went their separate ways when dad got sick. And they haven’t spoken since.

As you watch, you think it’s going to be fairly straight-forward, with one sister playing the good girl and the other, the bad girl. The playwright takes pains to make the good girl *very, very good*. She has sacrificed her life to care for her father and his sister. She never married; never had her own family; never left the ancestral home but devoted herself to the care of these two older family members.

And the bad girl? Yeah, she’s a piece of work. She abandoned the family as soon as dad got sick. Ran away with a low-life; had a bad marriage; two kids; now she's divorced. She had to commit her first-born to a mental institution because he loves setting things on fire. In fact, he burnt down their house. When she comes to visit him at the institution he reports joyfully, "They're not strapping me down anymore!'' To which she says, “Don't abuse the privilege.”

The good, the bad and the arsonist!

As the story progresses, however, cracks begin to appear. We start to wonder about the moral absolutes we assign to the categories of "good" and "bad." The good girl: Is she really all that good? In spite of knowing that her sister was impoverished and had two children, she never made any attempt to help, or even to contact them. Not one birthday card. Not one Christmas gift. Her sister and two nephews are here now only because she needs help they alone can provide.

Furthermore, we're forced to contend with an awful lot in the bad sister that isn't bad but really quite noble. She has worked multiple jobs to keep her family off the streets. She has just finished putting herself through beauty school so that the prospect of good work *finally* is hers. Then there's her return home – certainly not a pleasant prospect after a two-decade estrangement. She loaded the kids in the car and drove a thousand miles when told her sister – the "good girl" – has leukemia. She and her two sons are the only remaining hope her sister has for a bone-marrow transplant.

Good and evil: We think we know which is which. And we love to judge. It’s almost as if we each have this built-in “moral meter.” *Moralometer*. Yes, we do need to be discerning in life; to judge whom we can trust or not trust. But the Moralometer is something else entirely. It is that part of the false self desperately trying to prop itself up by putting others down. By judging.

The false self can’t be anything but insecure, anxious, afraid, jealous: the whole Pandora’s Box of vices. Living out of the false self is not abundant living. It is a neurosis-filled attempt at a meaningful life.

The parable Jesus provides today offers an alternative to living the false self by warning us against judging and by extolling compassion. He talks about wheat and weeds and a farmer wise enough to wait for harvest time to deal with “bad” weeds that have sprung up alongside “good” wheat.

Granted, there’s no chance the bad weeds will have a religious conversion and become good wheat. That isn’t the point. The point of the matter is you can’t tell them apart, like the sisters in “Marvin’s Room.” At least that’s one of the take-aways. These particular biblical weeds are called “tares.” They have seeded fronds that look just like wheat. At some future cosmic time that Jesus calls “the harvest,” well past the end of our personal life stories, the weeds and the wheat will be easier to distinguish.

Our job is to suspend judgment on those whom we might regard as lacking. These are the ones who just don't measure up. It feels more than reasonable to think of them as "bad:" bad neighbors; a lousy boss; a poor excuse for an in-law.

The other point of the matter is that if you pull up the weeds, you might damage the wheat growing along beside it. We are to grow compassionately and equally right next to the bad neighbor, lousy boss, poor excuse for an in-law. This is how we become like Jesus. We are to stop emphasizing the bad – gloating over it when we see it in others. We are to start concentrating on the good. Gloat over it when you see it in others. That in fact may be the very definition of compassion. It concentrates on what is good in others.

We see that in how God relates to Jacob from our first reading. God seems to have been utterly, sublimely unconcerned about the bad in Jacob. Make no mistake, Jacob had a lot of bad going on. Even as he was being born, he was beating up his twin brother, Esau, grasping at his heel and fighting for first entry out of the womb. He’s so bad that he exploited Esau when Esau was hungry and made him sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. Then he tricked his father into giving him the patriarchal blessing reserved for his brother, the firstborn. Jacob was a piece of work.

And yet he is the one God renames *Israel*. He is the one upon whom God bestowed the promises made to his grandfather, Abraham. It is Jacob's twelve sons who become the twelve tribes of Israel. Somewhere in between his contentious birth and the time of his death when he leaned on his staff and worshipped God, there was an incredible transformation in Jacob.

That transformation begins in today’s story of "Jacob’s Ladder."

While Jacob slept, he dreamt of a ladder set between heaven and earth with angels going up and down. Jacob's Ladder is a poetic way of seeing God's presence everywhere in creation being lavished upon us – even the “bad” ones among us; even Jacob. In the dream, God promises Jacob about every good thing in life that any of us could want or even imagine.

It’s a pity that the next few verses of the story aren’t included in today’s reading because in them, we see how Jacob reacts to God’s blessings. He doesn’t have a dramatic religious conversion. He isn’t motivated to become a good guy. What he does is bargain with God! He says: If you do all these things, God, I will worship you.

Then life takes him by the hand and leads him through twenty years in which he is the one who is cheated upon. He is the one tricked, lied to, deceived. And he tolerates it. Why? For love. For love of his wife, Rachel.

Maybe that was the true effect of the ladder dream. Maybe it opened Jacob to love and to be loved. Sometimes it takes “an act of God” to open us to love, like a dream where God comes to us with promises and blessings. God came lovingly, sweetly to Jacob, certainly not because Jacob was good, but in spite of the fact he was bad.

We are all Jacob. There is within us good and bad. Obviously we should try to be good people. Obviously we should try to avoid being bad. You don’t have to be a Christian to know that! Whether we are judged, by ourselves or others, as good or bad is secondary to the goal of love. We are meant to live inside God’s love and in love with God who is constantly wooing us, charming us, just like Jacob was.

We are given God’s love. When we live inside God’s love and in love with God, we just sort of naturally live good lives. We can throw away the Moralometer!