

Weeds Among Wheat

Preached FCCW July 19, 2020

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The first home Sue and I owned together was a townhouse in a condominium complex. Every Spring, professional landscapers hired by the condo association did an immaculate job of planting, pruning, mulching and weeding. After living there for ten years, we were pretty spoiled by the luxury of enjoying such well-manicured grounds without having to lift a finger to maintain them ourselves. In fact, the condo regulations forbade any exterior gardening by residents. I guess that they wanted to make sure professionals—and not us amateurs—were in charge of how the place looked.

Then, one Spring, I was called to my first church. We moved into a parsonage, where we inherited a large flower garden that had become overgrown with weeds during the time the property was unoccupied. Clearly, pulling up the weeds that had overwhelmed this garden was the first step in getting it under control. Actually, the first step, was knowing the difference between which were weeds and which were the good plants. Which was not a skill set I had acquired from living for ten years in a townhouse with professionally cared for lawns and gardens. It is exactly for situations like this--and people like me--that books like "Gardening for Dummies" are written.

At first glance, both the Parable of the Sower, which we read last Sunday, and the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, which I just read, seem as though they could be chapters right out of a first century, Middle Eastern edition of "Gardening for Dummies." Until you read Jesus' commentaries on their meanings. Then you realize that these parables address deep and lingering questions which haunt thoughtful people of faith and stand in the way of many people believing in God at all.

Specifically, the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds speaks to the question of how a God who is merciful and just, allows evil to exist in the world and doesn't just take a weed-whacker to the whole mess. This is a question of great relevance for us as we are being overrun by two problems we wish would go away. One is something the likes of which we have never seen before: which is why it is called the "Novel" Coronavirus. The other is the disease of hatred and racism. And while it may seem to us that the frequency of hate crimes are following their own steep trajectory, the truth is that there is really nothing "novel" about their prevalence. It is a scourge that has always been a part of the human race. The seeming uptick in racist rhetoric and actions you and I are witnessing in the news recently is just the tip of an iceberg of something experienced in its full depth and weight by people of color all the time.

Attempts at making sense of why a God who is good allows diseases of the body and of the soul to wreak such havoc are not just modern questions. Throughout the Bible we find people questioning why wicked people prosper, and disasters don't discriminate between good and bad in the suffering they inflict. The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds helps to reframe those questions.

Jesus said, "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." When he explained the meaning of this parable to his disciples, Jesus identified himself as the one who sows the good seed, and the weeds as the evils in the world.

The first thing this parable teaches us is that God is not responsible for the evil in the world. God sows good seed, not evil. But if God doesn't create evil, what DOES God DO about eradicating evil? The workers in the parable wanted to go and yank out all the weeds. Isn't that what we would like to see done, too? Just have God weed out all the bad stuff in life? What is God waiting for when COVID infection curves are on the rise and racial injustices fill the streets with protests and counter-protests?

This parable presents a more nuanced understanding of circumstances such as we find ourselves in. It teaches us about God's response to evil, by first enlightening us to the nature of evil itself. In a way, it reads a little like a lesson in "Gardening for Dummies." In this parable, when Jesus speaks about "weeds" he was almost certainly referring to a specific weed called "bearded darnel".

So, here are some facts about darnel. First, when darnel invades a wheat field it is deadly to the wheat crop. It is also dangerous to humans who consume it. Instead of life-giving grain, the seed darnel produces is poison. So, why would anyone eat darnel? Well, it turns out that darnel mimics the appearance of actual wheat. It is difficult for harvesters to distinguish the weeds from the wheat. So, not only does some of the poisonous darnel get harvested along with the life-giving grain; the darnel seeds get mingled with the wheat seeds. Then they are sown with the good wheat next season, corrupting the next generation of crops. Which is a lot like the way evil grows. Epic evil, such as a plague or racism, is obvious, but it is seldom spontaneous. One way or another, both diseases take over through person to person and generation to generation transmission until they achieve a malicious momentum of their own.

Another feature of darnel that makes it difficult to eradicate is that its roots entangle themselves among the roots of the good wheat plants. Attempting to weed out the darnel carries with it a risk of destroying much of the good crops along with them. This is a more complex, but also a much more accurate understanding of evil, than one of a world that is neatly divided into easily identifiable categories of good and bad. Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor classes, nor between political parties... but right through every human heart and through all human hearts." The potential for both good and evil in each and every person means that simply blaming God for not rooting out all evil and suffering in the world, confuses God's seeming indifference with God's actual mercy. And, overlooks our own accountability for doing what is in our power to change the way things are. Maybe, at the same time we are questioning what is taking God so long to weed out evil, God is wondering the same thing about us. When it comes to placing blame for the state of the world, perhaps a more productive approach than pointing fingers at God, would be to look in the mirror at what we all could be doing differently.

Augustine, one of the formative thinkers in the early Church, said that God has created every person with the gift of free will. God made us for loving relationship with God and with each other. But love is not genuine if it is not freely given. So, God gave us the power to choose love, or to reject it. So adamant is God about honoring the power we have been given to choose or reject God's way of our own free will- that God is willing to accept the risk our rejection of God's will.

How can an all-loving, all-powerful God allow suffering and evil? Because the only sure way to remove evil would be to take from us the very thing that makes us human; the very thing that connects us to God and to one another. Our free will to choose between being the wheat or the weeds.

Is it hopeless then, to dream of and work for a world of peace and justice? If only God can bring into being the Kingdom of God, does that then excuse us from doing what is in our power to change? No, because by our baptism, we are called to resist evil and oppression. These are the precise words that are spoken in the sacrament of baptism. Resisting evil and oppression is integral to who we are as Christians. But we must remember that our limited human judgement and our best efforts to eradicate evil will always be flawed and sometimes create new injustices to replace those we have done away with. Unless we are actively seeking God's Spirit to guide us. God's preferred method of weeding out evil happens through the transformed lives of people whose hearts are set on the coming of God's Kingdom and so, devote themselves to peace, justice, well-being and dignity of all people.

This parable ends with an assurance that evil is temporary and only good finally endures. That in the end, God will establish justice on the earth. Which goes to say, that while we amateurs are invited to devote ourselves to caring for God's garden, ultimately, we can trust that the formula for success does not come from a "Gardening for Dummies" manual. But that there is a professional who knows what He's doing, when we do not.

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