

Don't Worry About Those Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 20, 2008

I.

Today we continue with Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven. Last week we heard a parable about different types of soil into which seed was sown. Jesus explained that the seed was God's word, and the various soils were different levels of spirituality that people have. The result was that only in spiritually fertile soil can the Word be received so that it is fruitful in our lives. Jesus said that the Word will not flourish at all, or only briefly, in the other soils.

This week's parable is about how good and evil exist side by side in the world, and what we are expected to do about it. Again, seed is involved, but in a different way, as we shall see.

But before I continue, I would say that thinking about the kingdom of heaven reminds me of an old Episcopal priest—we'll call him Father John—who after years of service and obedience found that at times he could talk to God through prayer and receive immediate real-time responses from God.

Once when praying in this way God said, "You know Father John, a long time ago my Son Jesus described the kingdom of heaven in terms of seed scattered on the ground, and weeds growing among the wheat." Then God continued, "You might want to know some other things about heaven. For example, a million dollars on earth is but a penny here in heaven. And a thousand years on earth is but a minute here." Father John thought, "only a penny in heaven, huh," and then he said, "Well, God, in that case, could you spare me a million dollars?" God responded "Sure, just give me a minute."

The point of this story is that sometimes God's view is different. The parable in today's Gospel is an example of that. It shows the contrast between God's purposes and Satan's purposes, and it offers us heavenly guidance in overcoming our worldly tendencies.

II.

In the parable itself, which Jesus told to the crowds, he described a rural setting where a farmer's enemy secretly planted weeds among his wheat, and the farmer decided to let the weeds grow with the wheat because their roots had become intertwined and he couldn't pull up one without damaging the other. The farmer said he would separate the two at the harvest.

That's a fairly simple story. Farmers often have problems with weeds in their crops. Nothing new there. The only thing that might seem unusual is the fact that some bad guy sneaked into the field and intentionally planted some weeds, and the farmer decided not to do anything right away.

But Jesus' explanation of the parable to the disciples, away from the crowds, presented a different picture. He said that wheat represents those who are faithful and obedient to him, and weeds are the evil people of the world who serve the devil. And at the end of the age angels will come to cast those who are evil into the fiery furnace while the those who are faithful will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Wow! In an instant we're transported from agriculture to the apocalypse; from a quiet farm to the fiery furnace. The wheat ends up in heaven. Weeds are gathered and sent to hell. Maybe this is why weed killer is called "Round-Up." Think about that the next time you zap some weeds.

So now the parable, as explained by Jesus, offers strong language that might make us uncomfortable. We might want to hear about grace, not judgment. We might want to be told

of God's love, not his demands. We might prefer the joy of the salvation instead of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But we take the Gospel as we find it. And while we do find grace, and love, and joy in it, we also are confronted with the realities of evil in the world. The world was created perfect, just as the wheat was planted without weeds. But Satan introduced sin into the world just as weeds invaded the wheat. Christian wheat and devilish weeds exist together, and so now we live in a broken world. Bad things can happen to good people. And bad people sometimes seem to get the breaks. The harvest has not yet come.

We might ask why God doesn't control and micromanage every situation so that everything always comes out right. But that won't happen until God's kingdom is fully here, and we know that's not the case, not yet. Certainly, God defends us from evil. But perhaps a football analogy better describes today's world. For the time being, God might be playing a zone defense, not man-to-man, and sometimes the difficulties of life can find a crease in the zone.

III.

So, what does this parable mean for us? I would suggest two things. It contains a message of what we, as Christians, are called to do. And it also raises the question of how we actually do it. To use a sports analogy again, the first part deals with developing the game plan. The second part is about taking that game plan off the blackboard and putting it on the playing field.

Let's start with the meaning of the parable. A traditional interpretation focuses on how the farmer let the wheat and weeds grow together, and then separated them at harvest. The point here is that evil and good coexist in the world, and we must accept that basic reality and not think we always can impose our own good intentions on others. The harvest will take care of evil.

However, evil does not get a free pass. We still must confront and resist evil wherever we can; especially when evil people do evil things that hurt good people. This would include crime, terrorism, social injustice, tyranny, and other atrocities that diminish our society. God wants us to try to make the world a better place and leave something good behind for those who follow.

But, having said that, it's not always up to us to be judgmental about people apart from the harmful things they might do. It's not always up to us to blow the whistle on greed, or pride, or anger or other human shortcomings that we symbolically call weeds. That's God's job at the end. And in the interim we actually are called to try to convert those weeds into wheat.

So, a traditional understanding of this Gospel is positive rather than negative. We are asked to be tolerant just as God is patient. We are cautioned against finding fault with others as a solution to their problems. Instead, we are urged to persevere in faith and obedience in anticipation of that final day when all people will be called to account for the content of their lives.

IV.

But it's easier said than done, which leads to the second point. How do we deal with Satan and his weeds? How do we answer our call in the context of the eternal conflict between good and evil, and the struggle between how God wants to bless us and Satan wants to curse us? An African proverb says that when elephants fight, grass gets trampled. We want to avoid being that grass, don't we?

Let's start at the beginning. It's important to believe that Satan is a real spiritual being, and not just a metaphor or idea that symbolizes human weakness. And it's important to accept that sometime between creation in Genesis 1 and the temptation of Eve in Genesis 3 there was a rebellion in heaven, Satan and his angels were cast out of the eternity of heaven into the time and space of the created realm, and the rebellion thereby was spread to earth.

Scripture tells us these things. Satan exists. Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11), and throughout Scripture Jesus referred to Satan, or the devil, or the evil one, as a spiritual reality, not just a concept (e.g., Mt. 12:26, Lk. 8:12, Jn. 17:15).

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus said he saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning (10:18). And war in heaven and the expulsion of Satan and his angels is graphically described in the Book of Revelation (12:7-9). St. Peter said that the devil prowls like a lion, looking for people to devour (1 Pe. 5:8). St. Paul warned that Satan always is scheming to outwit us (2 Cor. 2:11).

The Book of Ephesians summarizes these truths. It says that our struggle ultimately is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (6:12). And in this context the term "heavenly realms" does not refer to the eternal dwelling place of God, but rather what you see when you look into the sky at night. The earth is part of that.

So when Jesus spoke of the devil in today's reading, he was referring to actual evil in the world that is being done by actual spiritual forces committed to prevent God from carrying out his purposes for us. And I hope we realize that the unseen world is no less real merely because we are unable to see it.

This raises the question of what is happening in the unseen spiritual world. I don't want to freak anybody out, but if what I said about Satan and his angels and the spiritual realms is true, then it follows there are beings in the world that we cannot see. And Scripture tells us they are both good and bad. I already mentioned how Satan and his angels have their domain on earth and within creation. But we also know that God sent his ministering angels to help us as well.

In Hebrews we are told that angels are spirits in the divine service, sent to serve those who inherit salvation (1:14). The Psalms proclaim that the Lord will command his angels to guard us in all our ways (91:11), and that angels are with those who fear the Lord, and will deliver them (34:7).

Now, does everyone have their own guardian angel? Scripture is not specific. I suggested earlier that for the time being God might be playing a zone defense rather than man-to-man, and maybe he even switches that from time to time. But Jesus made clear in today's Gospel that Satan is here in the world, and we know he is not working alone. We also know that angels of the Lord are here in the world to help us. There are many references in Scripture to each, and if they were here two thousand years ago there is no reason to believe they are not here now.

V.

So, here you are. You came here to pray, worship, celebrate the Eucharist, and think about holy things. And you heard a sermon about how good and evil exist together, and a discussion of angels and demons, and spiritual warfare.

Let me end with some words of hope. Don't worry about these evil powers. They are too strong to defeat with just our own strength and abilities. But Jesus can be our strength if we turn to him. And prayer and worship can frustrate evil and build up what is good.

The question is not how close we are to evil and darkness, but how close we are to God and light. By opening the door to the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ we close the door on everything that is not from God. And if we do that, then we don't have to worry about where all these weeds came from, or what they're doing here. *Amen.*