

Leave the weeds

Matthew 13:24-30

Mark Schloneger

July 19, 2020

Every morning, I get out of bed. I brush my teeth. I shave. I adorn myself with clothes. After eating some breakfast, I pour myself a good cup of coffee in a good mug and sit down to read the news, the news that was posted while I was sleeping.

In my original plans for this sermon, I was going to read off of headlines from today's morning news, serving as a reminder of all that we are facing these days. But none of us need reminded of infection rates, corruption, crimes, racial injustice, and conflict between nations and people.

You know, in the morning, when you read the news, you begin to wonder two things. First, in this world that God loves, how can all of these terrible things occur? And, second, what on earth can we do about them while we're awake?

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field," Jesus said. "But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared."

The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where did the weeds come from?" "An enemy did this," he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' "No," he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" (Matthew 13:24-3)

This parable -- The Parable of the Weeds, is the second in back-to back parables. They're a parabolic double feature, and they deserve to be examined back to back.

The first was the parable of the sower. We talked about that one last week. That parable, Jesus told his disciples, is about how people receive the message of the kingdom of God. Some are like seed that is sown on hard paths, some are like seed that falls in rocky soil, and some are like seed that falls among thorns. Their hardness of hearts, their apathy, their unwillingness to grow, their preoccupation with worry and wealth all make it so the kingdom of God never takes root in them and produces fruit. But the ones who hear the word, understand it, and respond to it are like seed that falls on good soil, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.

Ahh, that we can understand, those disciples must have thought. This explains why those Pharisees and those teachers of the law aren't hearing the good news in Jesus' teaching and preaching and healing. They're the hard paths, they're the rocky soil, they grow among thorns.

But we, we're the good soil. We're the good plants, the chosen ones, the fruitful ones, the productive ones. We're God's field. We're God's garden.

Isn't that we often think, too? I mean think about it, when we're together, we even sit in rows.

And so, we think -- *we think* -- our job is to go out, clear out, weed out, clean up, dig up, divide up, walk off, block off, and fence off God's territory on God's behalf.

But here's the thing: the difference -- the only difference -- between a garden plant and a weed has nothing to do with botany and everything to do with the gardener. A weed is simply a plant that wants to grow where people want something else. Weeds are people's idea, not nature's.

The the only way I can help to weed a garden is if I can know the difference between the plants that are wanted and the plants that are not, what is good and what is bad, what belongs and what gets removed.

If I don't have that knowledge, if I can't tell the difference, you wouldn't want me uprooting plants in your garden.

So it is with us. All through life, we are taught to differentiate between those who belong and those who don't. Men. Women. Black. White. Rich. Poor. Healthy. Sick. Able. Disabled. Gay. Straight. Some people belong in certain places while others do not. We think we know who is allowed to stay and to grow, and who must be weeded out and removed. Who deserves to live and who deserves to die.

Uproot them. Deport them. Bomb them. Evict them. Execute them. Cancel them.

"The mission of our nation is clear: we must rid the world of evil," President Bush declared in the days following September 11.

It happens in the church, too. In fact, we sometimes think it's our duty, our mission from God, to make these determinations. We sometimes think that it is the church's job to decide what constitutes weeds and wheat and who gets to belong and who doesn't.

From witch hunts, to Inquisitions, to the Crusades, to subverting Jesus' teachings to support national interests.

The Parable of the Sower teaches that the enemy's first goal is to prevent God's Word from taking root. This Parable of the Weeds teaches that the Enemy, named the devil, next works to distract workers from their preoccupation with the Word by overwhelming them with a loathing of evil. If the enemy cannot strike the root, he will smash the fruit. If he cannot hinder faith, he can corrupt love.

"Do you want us to go and pull the weeds?" the servants asked the field's owner. "No, he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."

The Parable of weeds warns disciples away from a crusader faith. Followers of Christ cannot be warriors for justice using the enemy's weapons.

We are not the gardener. We don't own the field. It's not our role to decide what gets to stay and what doesn't. We are utterly incapable of making those decisions.

Let the wheat and the weeds grow together, the owner said. We servants aren't the ones who do the separating. We can't.

'If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds," Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, "and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and to destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Let the wheat and the weeds grow together, the owner said.

We as the servants want to protest this. If the wheat and the weeds grow together, then how can we even tell what's in the field? Our reflex is to keep things pure, keep things orderly and clean, to keep the lines brightly drawn. And for that to happen, we have to remove all that is unclean from our midst.

Yet when we pull up the weeds, we uproot the wheat as well.

So what does this mean? Well, it doesn't mean that we stay silent in the face of evil. It doesn't mean that we promote a sort of faith that concentrates on people's souls and ignore the evil that oppresses people's bodies.

A too-great zeal to rid church of impurities is against Jesus' will and seriously hurts believers. I think this is a temptation that we have seen in the history of the Mennonite church. Yet, at the same time, a too-great zeal to go out into the world in the name of the latest issue tempts us abandon the name of Jesus.

This past Saturday, I woke up to news that two leaders of the civil rights movement had died: John Lewis and C.T. Vivian. Both of them worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. and helped to bring about lasting changes in our country's continuing quest for racial justice. For sure, they saw the evil in racist systems and people, and they marched and sat and spoke against it. Yet, there is no way to fully appreciate their life and work without knowing of their faith in God and identities as followers of Christ.

John Lewis wrote,

You are light. Never let anyone – any persons or force – dampen, dim, or diminish your light. Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness.

Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won. Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice. And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of love, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a Beloved Community that is finally at peace with itself."

Why are there weeds in the field? Where do they come from? In this world God loves, why do terrible things happen and where does this evil come from? Why is there so much evil in me?

Jesus' parable doesn't really answer that question, not completely at least. We are not told how and why evil persists in God's good and beautiful creation. We are not told why some people suffer so much more than others or why bad things happen to good people. We're simply told that evil does not come from God. God is good. And God's creation? "Behold, it is very good."

Yes, there will be a day, when God's garden will be restored and renewed, when it will be bountiful, when the weeds will be removed, and when all will be set right. But in the meantime, the Parable of the Weeds teaches us a patient, nonviolent faith.

After all, "[w]ho will separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35, 37-39)

Our job – our only job –
is not to garden, but to be gardened,
not to uproot, but to be rooted --
to be rooted and established in love,
so that we, together,
"may have the power
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—
that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:18-19)

Amen.