

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

At first glance, this morning's gospel may seem to be the same parable we read last week. But it's not! I think it's telling that last week's was entitled, "The Parable of the Sower," being largely about the one lavishly scattering the seed all kinds of places, and about the conditions needed for the seed to truly take root, thrive, and produce it's particular "fruit" – Illustrating the different ways in which people receive the good news of God's love.

This week's parable is entitled "The Parable of the Weeds," and though it is also about sowing and reaping, we find it is focused more on *why* there are weeds growing among the good wheat, and the price of ripping them out prematurely.

A parable is a verbal picture or story, drawn from nature or ordinary life, which engages us by its vividness or strangeness. Parables make us have to think a bit about I it's meaning in relation to the way *we* think about God and God's will, as well as what it means for the living of our lives. Parables offer glimpses into the kingdom of God, peeks into the mind of God, but they do not fully explain or precisely define either one. One NT scholar says that parables call attention to the inadequacy of all *our* pet explanations and understandings of the things and mind of God... which is why we often ask for, or need, explanations of Jesus' parables.

Good example: The Parable of the Good Samaritan. When someone used the word "neighbor" in Jesus' times – just as in our own – people tend to think of someone nearby, someone more or less like us in appearance in attitudes, in financial status, someone we generally like. But when Jesus, having just taught that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, is asked to define "neighbor," he tells the parable of the good Samaritan, and significantly broadens our narrow concept of neighbor into including not only strangers, or people who are *not* "just like us," but even our enemy. Does that parable settle the matter once and for all? In Jesus' mind, yes. But for us? It leaves us with something to think about for some time, to even struggle with as it exposes our narrow explanation as insufficient.

This morning's parable of the wheat and weeds is one of the more challenging parables in Matthew's Gospel. It deals with the problem of evil. What makes it challenging is that it isn't a thorough and decisive explanation of evil, nor is it an invitation for *us* to judge people (whether individuals or groups or nations) as "wheat" and "weeds." Neither is it instruction to simply "live and let live."

It is a story that is most likely trying to help the Christian community make sense of why folks in their midst were "falling away" from the faith; of what causes bad things (weeds) to happen to good people (wheat). This parable doesn't answer the ultimate question of why evil exists, but it acknowledges simply that it *does* exist, that nothing in this world is simply a matter of chance. It acknowledges that this world, and for that matter our communities, our churches, our households and we, ourselves – is not what it could be, and that there is a lot of hurt and frustration that we would like to do something about, but don't seem able to.

The servants in the parable are frustrated; frustrated that all their faithful and hard work out in a field of *good* soil, has nevertheless not resulted in a perfect harvest, but in literally, a real mixed bag of wheat and weeds. They ask the master, "Didn't we sow good seed in good soil? Where on earth, then, did all of these weeds come from?"

The Master replies, "An enemy has done this."

Eager to make it right even to the point of risking damage to the good wheat, they ask, "Should we go out there and rip all the weeds up?"

Last fall, not being able to go out into my gardens to weed during the summer because of the pain from back issues I was having, we had a popular local professional landscaping outfit come to pull out all the weeds, plant several new hydrangea, and prepare the gardens for the coming winter and spring. Earlier in the spring before my back went haywire, I had planted some new perennials which had only gotten a small start because I couldn't keep up with caring for the garden. There was also a rather sizeable (18" high, 2' across) bee balm plant which had bloomed bright red flowers profusely, and contributed not only to the beauty of my garden, but to the health and survival of the bees. The landscapers also treated the beds with some kind of organic weed-reducing stuff which was supposed to work this

spring. And they did all of this in a remarkably short amount of time.

We paid them the sizeable fee they charged, and waited confidently until this spring. Over the winter, my back improved at least enough to do very short spurts of gardening this year.

But when I got out there after the soil was workable again this spring, I discovered that they had not only pulled the weeds. Gone was my beautiful bee balm plant, which apparently they had thought was a weed; gone were virtually all the modest perennials which had worked so hard over the summer to survive the overwhelming hunger and thirst of the weeds all around them. The weeds were triumphantly returning (though smaller at that point) despite the thorough weeding and the organic weed-reducing stuff that had been administered in the fall.

I was in shock. These people were *professionals* who I thought would know the *difference* between a weed and an intentionally planted plant. Especially my bee balm – it had taken several years for it to get to the size it had been, and had been one of my prized blooming-things in my garden! Being professional gardeners, couldn't they tell *that wasn't a weed?* What -- did they dislike bees so much (which would be odd for a professional gardener) that they tore out the struggling bees' source of food and reproduction?

To make matters worse, a few weeks later, after my new hydrangea and day lilies were all a-bud, I took a stroll around my gardens just to enjoy and admire the fruits of my garden creations, and discovered every last bud had been eaten clean off the stem, as if cut with precision with a knife. *Every single one* of those new hydrangea, each one a different color; and all those lovely lilies, – in addition to a new peony plant chewed *to the ground* -- *all of them gone* before they could even bloom once.

Where had all of these weeds and invisible flower bud-snarfing creatures come from? I never saw them coming! And where did those new perennials go which I had so joyfully planted despite some pretty attention-getting back pain a year ago?

And I knew: "*An enemy has done this.*" Someone/thing who didn't particularly care about the cost to the overall health of the garden, or on discerning which was truly plant and truly weed; someone who just wanted to yank those offending weeds out, and critters out to

enjoy a colorful breakfast, whatever the cost.

Are you getting the picture? Are we getting a glimpse into why we leave the judging and the punishing *OR*, very likely, the redeeming -- to God?

This feeling and desire to rip out what offends us is not foreign to us, is it? How many times have we felt like “an enemy has done this”? When the cancer returns, when the job goes away, when the relationship ends, when depression sets in, when addiction robs a loved one (or ourselves) of life, when a congregation is divided, when a loved one’s life is cut short, when war forces thousands to flee as refugees and the world turns its back on them and on so many other people in need. At these times, the sense that this world is *not* what God intended can be almost unbearable, and you don’t have to believe in a red-suited devil with a pointy tail and pitchfork to name the *reality* of sin, brokenness, and evil in the world. This parable doesn’t so much explain evil as it powerfully acknowledges it. It’s *not* just superstitious hogwash.

And, having acknowledged it, can we then also acknowledge that this is *neither* God’s design, nor God’s desire or will? When I hear the following things as a response to tragedy or suffering, it about makes me scream. They reveal how difficult it is for many of us to avoid the temptation to try to explain evil – quite ironically – by assigning it to some greater idea God supposedly has for us.

- * “Don’t worry, it’s part of God’s plan.” someone says to me after a miscarriage;
- * Or, “Don’t worry, God never gives us more than we can handle” someone says to us when our lives seem to be unraveling;
- * Or, “God’s purpose for this will reveal itself in time” when a loved one is suffering from severe pain due to an accident or an severe illness.

All of these words of supposed comfort end up blaming God as responsible for tragedy and brokenness, in a way not all that different than insurance policies that once protected us against, “fire, hail, tornado, hurricane, and *other acts of God.*”

This morning’s parable reveals that God does *not, ever*, desire or will evil for us -- not in any way, shape, or form...that our tragedies are *not* part of God’s “plan.”...that God never, ever wants us to suffer...that when we pray “Thy will be done,” we’re not resigning

ourselves to some kind of divine catastrophe. Rather, that God’s love, healing, redeeming for us be done on earth, just as it is in heaven. “Your will, God; *your* will be done – please, God.”

According to Paul, “God works on the side of good in all things.” What do we think the *cross* was, and still is? The cross of Jesus’ horrid suffering and death offers supreme testimony that evil happens, and yet *it is not strong enough to defeat God’s love*; that God is committed to staying with us through even the most difficult of circumstances, and that God can and will work God’s *good and loving* will through even the worst of situations.

God did not will my son-in-law to fall off his dirt bike and break his back.

God did not will your loved one to have cancer.

God did not cause a drunk driver to kill someone you know in another car.

“The enemy has done this,” says the Lord. Not God, but the enemy.

In the end, it will be up to God to sort out the wheat and the weeds, good and evil. We can – and are encouraged to – work *against* evil and *for* the good in ourselves, in our communities, and in the world. But ultimately, it is, and will be, up to God.

The final judgment of others is left in God’s hands. We rarely know what motivates other people to speak and act as they do, and while we may oppose their words and actions, *we* cannot remove them from the power of God’s redemptive love by taking judgment into our own hands. And, trusting that God will redeem the world means it is not up to us to have to defeat evil and death – that’s God’s job. But we *can* care for our neighbor as Jesus illustrates “neighbor,” speak out against injustice, and support those in need...right here, right now.

Waiting for God’s final acts of judgment and redemption is hard. There is so much pain in the world. But, in the meantime, confident of God’s gracious judgment, mercy, and redemption, we can nurture the wheat and strengthen all that is *good* all around us. For while the enemy is powerful, our Lord is more powerful still. Amen.

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