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Proper 11A: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Gardening for Good

Today our gospel reading has us address what may seem an unlikely topic on a fine summer's morning: the devil. No, this will not be a hellfire and brimstone sermon, but I will talk about the devil, because Jesus talked about the devil.

The subject comes up because Jesus is telling parables. We may think of Jesus just going about lecturing, telling us things he wants us to know, working his way through various topics. But I think Jesus told parables to address the real questions people have, the real things we struggle with.

Like today's parable, usually called the Weeds in the Wheat, which is about the problem of evil in the world. Where does it come from? Will it ever end? When something truly bad happens – is it part of God's plan, God's intention?

Here's how today's parable puts it. The servants of a householder notice that weeds are coming up alongside the grain they were expecting to see in the field. They go to the master and say, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then did these weeds come from?" God, did you cause this? Didn't you make a good world? Don't you want good for us? God – did you do this?

Sometimes well-meaning people respond to tragedy by saying that it is God's will when something tragic happens.

A priest was called to the hospital to the crib side of a little baby in the parish. The parents were standing there in shock. Their beautiful baby girl had just died. Doctors were unable to resuscitate her after the rattle she had stuck in her mouth broke and a small piece became lodged in her tiny throat.

She couldn't breathe and her parents rushed her to the hospital, but it was too late. The baby's grandparents were also there, trying desperately to comfort the shocked and grief-stricken parents. The grandmother said, "Don't be sad. This was God's will." Fortunately, the priest was able to talk with the parents about how God must be sharing the grief they're experiencing, about how God does not will the suffering of any of God's creatures, about how God's heart breaks when we know trouble and pain and sadness.

We do know trouble and pain and sadness. There is evil in the world. And a very real question is, "didn't you sow good seeds? These are weeds!"

The master in the story gives a clear answer: an enemy has done this. These weeds are not God's work. Suffering is not God's will. An enemy has done this. In his explanation of the parable, Jesus says the enemy is the evil one, the devil, the enemy of God and all that God loves. The parable gives a picture of how the evil one works. The English word devil comes from the Greek word, *diabolos* – like, diabolic. At its root, is a verb that means "to throw something across," so in a figurative sense, "to make a quarrel between two parties."¹ One of the devil's favorite tactics is "Let's you and him fight." In today's parable, the evil one throws seeds across God's field to provoke animosity between God and people. "God – didn't you plant good seeds?" "Is evil part of God's plan?" "What kind of a God would cause this to happen?" The devil knows he can just sow the seeds of confusion, introduce a distraction, and humans will wreak the havoc themselves. "Do you want us to start digging the weeds up?" the servants ask. "How about we take care of it, go out into the field and start pulling things out by the roots?"

The devil knows he can start a quarrel between humans pretty easily. He knows that if he can get people to start identifying themselves as the wheat and others as weeds, the destruction will start. The enemy can hurt God by hurting those God cares about. And he can get humans to do it for him. In the parable, the enemy doesn't even stick around to see how it will turn out. He knows how effective this tactic can be.

Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?

¹ Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Matthew* vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 273.

“No,” says the master, “for in gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them.”

On the face of it, we could see this answer leading to something like this: drug dealers, child abusers, terrorists – let them be. Don’t mess around in the garden. That’s just the way it is.

But that’s not what this parable is about. There are plenty of places where Jesus talks about justice, about taking care of the vulnerable, the needy, standing with and for the victims of violence and hatred. This is not that parable. Today’s parable is addressing a different concern, calling us to wrestle with a different reality. This parable is a warning against our inability to distinguish between weeds and wheat, a warning against our desires to judge others and to cause irreparable damage in the name of rooting out what we see as weeds, the possibility that we may do more harm than good, hurting the wheat as well in the process.

The master tells the servants, “Your job is not to label, uproot, cast out, purge, call irredeemable, write off as worthless or identify as beyond help or saving. Your job is not to purify. Your job is to grow and produce fruit.”

Jesus was all about being with people and loving people and not giving up on people and helping people change – people others called weeds: sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes. There is no one beyond the reach of his saving embrace. The God we know in Jesus seems to have a great amount of patience and faith that the harvest will mature, that saints and sinners can bring mutual help to one another, that weeds really don’t have as much power against the Kingdom of God as we may fear they do, that the wheat will grow and there will be a plentiful harvest at the end of time.

Even in the way that the end of time is described, those who will be collected out of God’s kingdom are evildoers, literally, those who are lawless – meaning, not evil people, as if there is a category of those beyond hope, but those who in the end, deliberately turn their backs on God’s law of fruitful love.

Dr. Tom Long told the story of joining a wonderful large Presbyterian congregation in Atlanta. Many of the parishioners were well off, but

amongst them was a homeless man named Marshall. Marshall joined the adult new members class along with Dr. Long. This was a wonderful church. Perhaps in some places, someone would have said about this homeless man who didn't quite fit in, who had nothing financial to contribute, who looked like he needed more help than he would ever be able to give, who had questionable habits and hygiene, who had been in trouble with the law, "here is a weed." But at this church Marshall was welcomed. And in the new members class, people got to know him. When new members were asked why they had joined this church, most gave answers like, "I really love the music program," "there's a good youth program," "the education program is thought provoking and interesting." Marshall said, "Because Jesus saved my life in this church."

After the class ended and Marshall became an official member, Marshall decided to turn himself into the police because of a minor crime he had committed in the past. It may have been minor, but it was big enough to get him sent to jail. "Now, do you see what a weed was growing here?"

After about a month, Long and others went to visit Marshall in jail. They asked him how it was going. Marshall replied that it was okay. He had started a prayer group, and although there were only five members so far, he hoped others would join them. Also, he said, do you know, there are so many people here who can't read or write. So he started a group to write letters home for those people. He said, that's my outreach so far. Maybe God will show me other things I can do for him here.² Weed? Wheat?

Our job is not to uproot, cut down, or tear out what we believe to be weeds. We *are* told to do good instead of evil, to bless instead of curse, to help instead of stand off, to love instead of hate, to forgive instead of resent. In the face of evil our job is to bring people together, not tear them apart, to bring them to know God's love. In us, around us, through us, perhaps despite us, in ways we cannot see, God is working to preserve all good. God is so merciful that God allows evil to exist so that what is good might grow, so that we might see the mystery that God can bring good, even out of evil, life even out of death, a good, rich harvest out of a field that was covered with weeds. Someday, the wheat will be gathered into the harvest and

² I heard Dr. Long tell this story at the Festival of Homiletics in May 2002 – I think as part of his sermon on this text.

weeds will no longer threaten. God is in charge. God will prevail. Good will win.

In the meantime, let us sow God's good seeds. Along with St. Francis, may our prayer be: where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

Amen.