

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43 The Divine and Active Patience

Today's Gospel reading picks up where we left off last week. We are still on the lakeshore with a great crowd listening to Jesus teach them many things from a boat, in parables. Like the last week, Jesus first tells a story to the whole crowd, a parable that sheds light on their understanding of the kingdom of heaven, and then explains it to the disciples.

Hear now, the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 13, 24-30, and then 36-43.

How is this a Good News to us? The disciples who were following Jesus saw how Jesus healed people and brought back human dignity to those who were marginalized in their society, and how powerful his teaching was. But they also saw Jesus was met with pernicious opposition from the religious leaders, which would grow into outright hostility and rejection. Why?

“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where did these weeds come from?” The parable assures disciples that the rejection of Jesus, and therefore the resistance to God's Word, is not because of any defect or falsehood in Jesus's words/deeds, but it literally stems from a completely different source altogether.

“An enemy has done this.” Calling it the devil, Jesus names the reality that evil exists, and it is not of God. You can't blame the evil in the world on God.

The Gospel writer Matthew's community was an early post resurrection church, and they were starting to discover a difficult reality. They were experiencing that their church was not made up only of “good seed” Christians; there were “bad seeds” of questionable characters, from annoying to outright despicable. People were having disagreements about important questions of faith. For heaven's sake, their church was not pure nor holy!

And has that changed in the last 2000 years? I don't think so. Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church comes pretty close but perhaps not quite... The members of Matthew's church were asking themselves “how are we to deal with these people who are clearly in the wrong?” If we are called to be Christ's body, which we are, for Christ's sake, quite literally, we couldn't allow “weeds” to grow rampant... could we?

“Then, Master, do you want us to go and gather them?” The slaves offered to do that, because that would be the reasonable thing to do, and in their eyes, even the necessary thing to do. But to their surprise, the householder tells them, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.”

What? Who would intentionally allow weeds to thrive alongside wheat? Today we could counter him and say, “we could use weedkillers,” but I think the householder’s response would have been the same; it could contaminate the wheat, too.” And worse, it could harm those who consume the wheat. So, he says to leave them; let them both be.

This choice by the householder to leave the weeds tells us that God is fully aware that evil really exist in the real world we live in, in our church, and even in ourselves; and it is still not part of God’s will, it is not part of the kingdom of heaven. And yet, God waits with the divine patience, born of divine wisdom, for the sake of the kingdom.

As for us personally, we can only see the immediate harm the weeds could do or are doing; we know it when we see a “clear and immediate danger.” We may not be wrong in this judgment; we are just nearsighted.

Now I invite you to call to mind one thing, or one person, who is pretty clear to you that they are one of the “children of the evil one”. Everyone’s got one. It may be someone from your childhood; a bully who made you not want to go to school, or a neighborhood brat that made you want to take a detour, so you don’t have to walk by her house. Maybe he was a boss at work that made you want to quit your job. They are the people that make you question “whatever has possessed them to behave like that? How dare she say such things?” and manages to get the better of you. If you can’t think of anyone personal in your life, you might consider your reaction to what some politician has said or done.

Like the slaves in the parable who questioned if the master sowed bad seed by mistake, we ask “why God let bad people get away with things.” Like the slaves who suggested to the master “should we pull the weeds out?” we are sure in our mind, the world would be a better place without them. We say to God “Look, what harm and destruction they are causing. What injustice. You are okay with the violence they are inflicting on your children?”

No, God is not okay with that. “At harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” And Jesus says “..and the reapers are angels.”

Here is our assurance and God’s promise; not only is God ‘not okay’ with the weeds growing rampant in the field, but God will also put a quite definitive end to it, so that the evil ones would be weeping and gnashing their teeth. This harsh expression Matthew likes to repeat

makes me cringe; I don't like to imagine anyone weeping and gnashing their teeth, especially me; what if I am bundled up together with the weeds and thrown into the furnace?

If you hear this as God's angry judgment against you for not being the right kind of Christian, rest assured, it is not. Or, if you were hoping this is what would happen to that person you'd love tell to go to you know where, I'm sorry, it is not. Rather, this is an expression of God's utter rejection of evil that would ruin, or is already ruining even as we speak, God's beloved creation.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth, fire and brimstone; they are not God's condemnation of those who strive to live out the image of God in which they were created but come up short, which is all of us. Rather, it tells us that, it is with such fierceness God will redeem us from all the snares. God with God's Divine Patience will redeem all of God's creation. God's plan is expansive. Whatever it is you are suffering now, it is not outside the scope of what God will save. But until then, while we are still praying "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," the weeds and the wheat share the field.

This parable frees us from the burden of eliminating the weeds. This does not mean we can allow bad behavior; we are to address them, confront them, just as Jesus did, but it is not ours to banish the bad actors altogether; that task of taking out the evil is given to the angels, God's designated reapers. Who are the angels? Suffice to say, we are not them.

Through this story, Jesus warns us against the building of boundaries and efforts to have a "pure" community that is intolerant of its weedy members. The church is called to strive for purity, not to be a purist. We will be singing later, as our sending hymn, "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord," that equates the church with the kingdom of heaven, but we are not there yet. The church as we know it is made up of both the wheat and the weed, as it should be.

We are called to strive for unity and purity, precisely because our community is made up of both the wheat and the weed. Among the congregation, and even within the heart of an individual believer, there grows self-centeredness, hypocrisy, arrogance, greed, manipulateness, and even hatred. God says engage with them, bear with one another, be patient with yourselves and learn your own shadow side and work out the way for justice and what is right. How can we?

The Spirit of God is working within us and through us. God is not just being patient but also active in the world that struggles between good and evil at all levels, in our heart, in our

families, in our churches, in our cities, our country, and in our world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit God is activating those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, to follow the way of truth and life.

We can see that saving act of God in the world most clearly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus worked with disciples who did not always understand him. Jesus commissioned disciples who even betrayed him. Jesus can surely work with the church, even Jemez Springs Community Presbyterian Church, while it is still a mixed bag of imperfect people, to be the witness of God's perfect love.

It sure is frustrating and even painful at times, but each of us are at any moment a potential wheat and a potential weed. Let us give thanks to God who patiently works within us and through us for our own transformation and the transformation of the world.

We will be listening to more parables of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven next week, when a great crowd gathers in the outdoor worship at Hummingbird Camp. Between now and then, I'd like you to ponder this... In the bible, the word "kingdom" is a verb noun, like "love" is a verb and a noun. Kingdom of heaven is not a place where God lives but it is the sphere of God's rule. Kingdom is where God "reign" and "rules." It is where God's will is actively unfolding. As God's saving action, kingdom of heaven is always happening, even as we pray "thy kingdom come." Amen.