

Parables and Paradox

A God who is both one and three. A divine one who dies, only to live again. A king who is also a shepherd. We are saved by grace alone, and faith without works is dead. To give is to receive. To pardon is to be pardoned. Foolishness for Christ is true wisdom. In weakness according to the world, we find true strength in Christ.

Paradox is central to the Christian faith. We are constantly called by scripture and by our own experience of the divine to hold together truths that seem contradictory, and even irreconcilable. And yet, it is in these very contradictions that we find the strength and the depth of our faith. Living in a world, as we do, that is so very full of contradiction and outright conflict, we need a religion “robust enough and complex enough to bear the weight of that messy world.”¹

Matthew 13 is a chapter of short stories, of parables, that lean into paradox and contradiction. An enormous tree that grows out of a tiny seed. A tiny amount of yeast mixed into three measures of flour that gives life to the whole batch of dough. A field full of weeds being allowed to remain within the good wheat until harvest. Jesus told these parables to help those who were learning from him to understand something about God's character, what God's kin-dom is like, and how to behave now in order to bring that kin-dom to fruition. And many of those who listened, paradoxically, found themselves without the ears to really hear the message. Let anyone with ears listen!

The parable before the one we read this morning is the one you heard last week from Seth, of the Sower who sowed his seed on good soil, and on the hard soil of the path, among the weeds, and among the stones. This parable portrays an extravagantly generous God who spreads the

¹ Debie Thomas, “Journey with Jesus,” posted July 12, 2020, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2570>

Good News even to the hardened, the shallow, and the bristly. Today's parable introduces another agricultural reality - it is not just the soils that vary, there are also different kinds of seeds.

The sower has sown good seed in his field for a healthy wheat harvest. But in the dark of night an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. "So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well" (13:24-26).

Matthew is likely talking about a weed called darnel, here. Darnel, which closely resembles wheat, would have been a familiar nuisance to the wheat farmers in Palestine. The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident only when the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight.²

When the slaves notice the weeds among the wheat, their first response is to question the quality of the seed. "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?"

Where did the weeds come from? Was the seed that was sown inherently flawed? How could the master have screwed this up so badly?

In the Genesis creation stories, we read that God created the world good. Indeed, we read that we humans were created very, very good. So, how do we reconcile that good creation with the reality we see in the world around us.

It seems that violence is the trigger response to disagreement in our increasingly polarized world. Obscene wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few while nearly half of the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 per day.³ 21% of children in this country live below the poverty line.⁴ Daily, we watch, and some of us participate, in calculations regarding how many Covid infections and deaths are worth accepting to allow us to get back to some sense of normalcy. Covid has revealed the brokenness of a system so dependent upon schools to feed and care for children, and on low-wage workers that we are put in the position of choosing to put children, teachers, and the poor at risk in order to rescue the economy. We can no longer claim ignorance of the reality of

² Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=979

³ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-global-poverty>

⁴ <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>

systemic racism and the havoc it has wreaked on generations of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in this nation.

So, how do we reconcile all of that with the good creation of God – with the goodness of God the creator? With the parable of the weeds, Jesus answers those who struggle with this question – those who are scandalized at seeing evil seemingly everywhere they look. Good and bad, Jesus tells us, will always be found together - in individuals, in communities, and in institutions.

In the parable, the slaves are anxious to take care of the problem, to root those nasty weeds right out. They know that the weeds present a danger to the healthy growth of the good wheat. But the master stops them, pointing out that the root systems of the weeds and the wheat are hopelessly intertwined. In gathering the weeds they would uproot the wheat along with them. He orders them to let both grow together until the harvest. Then he will send out his reapers to collect and burn the weeds and to gather the wheat into his barn.

And then... Jesus goes on to explain, “just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mtt. 13:40-42).

Ouch. That’s rough. So, are we to believe from this that there are two kinds of people – good and evil? And the good get gathered in while the evil go to furnace of fire with all of the wailing and teeth gnashing? That seems a little simplistic to me. Perhaps when Jesus says that the reapers will collect the weeds to burn in the fire, he means that everything within us that causes sin will be burned away. Don’t we all have weeds and wheat – good and bad – within us? The heroes and heroines of the Bible certainly provide fodder for that statement.

Throughout Genesis, we hear about the promises that God extends to God’s people through Abraham and his descendants. We read about Jacob, who God names Israel and to whom God says, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Jacob – the father of the men who became the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob – who fathers Joseph

who will save the people of Egypt and Israel from famine. Jacob – who is blessed by God and loved by God.

Jacob – who disguised himself to steal the blessing from his father that rightfully belonged to his brother Esau. Jacob – who showed such clear favoritism for Joseph that his brothers were overcome with envy to the point of plotting to kill him. Jacob – who is constantly wrestling and bargaining with God. Jacob – hero of the faith – was certainly a mixed bag of wheat and weeds.

King David, who was described as a king after God's own heart, was also an adulterer and a murderer. Wheat and weeds.

Just a few chapters after this parable in Matthew, Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Wheat and weeds. Yet, in spite of these strong words and Peter's repeated failings, Jesus does not give up on Peter. Instead, he entrusts the future of his mission to him and the rest of the often bumbling and clueless disciples. Wheat and weeds.

Perhaps this parable was addressed to some overly enthusiastic gardeners who wanted to hit the fields of God's creation with their weedwhackers and their Round Up sprayers. Perhaps they thought they were called to purify the community by rooting out the bad seeds. This seems to be a temptation for followers of Jesus in every age. We whip ourselves into a weeding frenzy, certain that we know the difference between weeds and wheat, and that we know how to deal with the weeds!

This is not necessarily a bad impulse, in and of itself. We know that the weeds can make it more difficult for the good crops to grow and flourish. But Jesus' parable makes clear that any overzealous attempt to root out the weeds will only do more damage to the crop. And we certainly see this in society – and even in congregations and in denominations, with some determined to root out anyone who does not agree with the "right" interpretation of Scripture, the right way to worship, or the right stand on a particular issue. We divide into camps of right and wrong, good and bad, with God and against. We pronounce judgment on people outside the church, or simply outside of our church. We pronounce judgement on people who differ from us politically.

Whether that judgment is focused within the church or without, it does serious damage to the church and its mission of peace, unity and purity.

The reality is that we cannot possibly tell the difference between the good crop and the weeds. Each of us, individually and communally is a mixed bag - a field sown with both wheat and weeds. The parable's caution against pulling up the weeds prematurely reminds us to allow room for the plants to grow, change and flourish. And what if that opportunity to develop and grow in fullness into the image of God is addressed to everyone? What if, instead of attempting to root out what we see as bad within people and communities, we nurture those people and communities and allow what is good to flourish, to grow, and to become fruitful?

This parable is often read as a condemnation of those who worship or believe or practice differently, and of those who live their lives differently. Read this way, it cannot possibly reflect the complexities of human life. Perhaps, read more deeply, this parable encourages us to have some patience, to consider what good can be nurtured, to create and to take advantage of opportunities for growth. Perhaps here and now is not the time to pronounce judgement about who is in and who is out, who is good, and who is evil. And perhaps that is not our job at all. The master tells his servants to leave the fields alone – to give them room to grow. It is only at the time of harvest that the wheat will be sorted from the weeds. And, who knows, we might be surprised by the results of that sorting. We might find that those who do in the end prove fruitful will be a different gathering of people from those we first imagined.

Our task is to encourage the growth, not to do the weeding.

Thanks be to God.