

+ *The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ According to
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

Another parable Jesus put before the crowds: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of the grow together until the harvest; and 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.'" Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 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 the 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. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

The Gospel of the Lord

GOOD SEED AMONG BAD SEED-JUDGEMENT

Sermon prepared by The Rev. Ralph W. Bayfield D.Min.+, July 19, 2020, Proper 11 for
Trinity Episcopal Church, Martinsburg, West Virginia
Church of the Good Shepherd, Pine Grove, Bluemont, Virginia

In common philosophical and religious discussions there is often raised the question of “How can a perfect or good God permit evil and suffering in the world?” With the worldwide coronavirus that is taking thousands of lives, the question has real poignancy today.

In response to this question, Jesus does not give a direct answer to the common question, but rather identifies the reality of evil and teaches us to live with the bad things in life. St. Matthew’s Gospel reading for today with its imagery of sowing and reaping seed and harvest is used by Jesus to illustrate the nature of God’s Kingdom.¹ In the story of good wheat growing among the bad weeds Jesus addresses the issue of how to respond to sin and evil in the world.

Jesus begins by comparing the Kingdom of heaven to a farmer who plants good seed in his field; but despite the farmer’s care, weeds inevitably spring up. Jesus declares “An enemy” has come in the night and sown weeds among the wheat.” What is the farmer to do? In today’s world, the farmer would probably put a covering of chemical weed killer that would eliminate the weeds. Ironically this action would probably produce runoff that would pollute the streams, rivers and the oceans, leading to climate change and we’d have another problem.- However, in Jesus day climate change was not an issue like it is today. However, it is not intrinsically relevant in the sermon about the wheat and the weeds!

¹ *Revised Common Lectionary, Episcopal Edition*; Church Publishing Inc., New York, 2017, Proper 11, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-41 pages 162-163

In Jesus' parable; the farmer forbids his slaves from eradicating the weeds when they appear for fear that in pulling out the weeds, they would uproot the good wheat as well. They are to *wait* until the harvest time. Then the bad no good, useless weeds are to be reaped first, bundled up and burned; but the good wheat is to be gathered into the farmer's barn.

The disciples ask Jesus for the meaning of the parable. Jesus explains² that the farmer, the planter is the Son of Man (That's Jesus.); the field is the world; the good seed, are the children of the kingdom and the weeds are the children of the evil one and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels and they will collect out of the kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will "shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."³

Some scholars say the closing salvation of the righteous in the parable has antecedents in the Old Testament *Book of Daniel*. God has shown favor to Daniel, but in Persia, the King was considered God, and Daniel said he could worship only the God of Israel. The leaders trumped up some charges against Daniel and although he was a very good and righteous man, well liked by the King, the Monarch reluctantly found bound to throw Daniel in the lions den. The King spoke to Daniel and said that he hoped Daniel's God would rescue him from the lions. The King had trouble sleeping that night and at daybreak rushed to the den of lions where Daniel

² *ibid.* Matthew 13:37-43

³ *ibid.* Matthew 13:43a

had been incarcerated. He called out, “O Daniel, has your God whom you served, rescued you from the lions?” Daniel responded, “O king live forever! My God sent His angel who shut the mouths of the lions, because I was found innocent in His sight. Nor have I done anything wrong to you, O King.” The King is overjoyed and Daniel is released to new life because he was righteous.⁴

The parable of our Gospel reveals that the Kingdom includes both wheat and weeds. The Church cannot separate itself from the world; thus the community of faith must accept the bad along with the good. However, it is not our task to segregate saints from sinners. The prerogative of judging the quality of someone’s relationship to God belongs to God alone. Furthermore, even though we do not know the exact end time, what matters is that *the One who loves us most fully* is the One who finally will judge us. Jesus came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it,⁵ and this applies to the fallen as well as to the faithful.

There is a thorny question about exclusion. The great New Testament scholar from Union Seminary in New York, Reinhold Niebuhr in his work *Justice and Mercy* speaks of today’s *end of time* parable of the wheat and the tares as being “against all moral impulse.” Of course we want to pull the weeds out of the garden and allow the decent normal plants to bear fruit. But “Nay,” said the householder. “Lest while we gather up the tares, (the weeds), you root up also the wheat.”⁶

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*; Zondervan Publishing House< Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984; *Daniel 6:1-25*: pages 630-631

⁵ *ibid The Holy Bible: John 3:17*, page 752

⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold, *Justice and Mercy*; Harper & Row, New York, 1974, quoted in *Synthesis: Proper 11, Postscript*; Boyds, MD. July 20, 2014 page 4

According to Niebuhr, the suggestion here is that a great deal of evil may come from selfishness of we humans; but perhaps MORE evil may come from our premature judgements about ourselves and each other.

Therefore, Niebuhr wisely concludes: “Let both grow together until the harvest.”

The wonderful words of the Bible suggest that, while we have to judge, *there is judgement beyond our judgement and there is fulfillment beyond our fulfillments.*” Here we have to trust in the Lord about judgement and fulfillment.

In Matthew’s collection of parables, the story of wheat and weeds growing up together follows the explanation added to Jesus’ Parable of the Sower. Matthew has omitted the parable of the seed that grows secretly. We have to wait until Mark 4:26-29, gives us that parable in next year’s readings in the lectionary Year C.

Matthew has offered the analogy of an explanation instead. The form of the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) is such that it suits the allegorical interpretation that follows in Matthew 13:36-43, making it seem unlikely that either Matthew or his sources substantially reworked a parable of Jesus. Since, the First Evangelist is the only Gospel writer to include the story, the account probably came from a tradition known only to Matthew.

The aim Matthew most likely had in mind by including this parable was to develop an ethical elevation of the community to which he was writing. How can the body of the elect include less-than-faithful members? At what point, if at all, does it become necessary to exclude members who fail to live up to the standards of Christ’s life and teachings?

In this parable, Matthew takes a stand for including doubters and obvious sinners. In light of what Matthew's Jesus says about judgementalism,⁷ this would be authentically Jesus view. We have strong reasons to believe that the parable in some similar form, came from Jesus Himself.

The explanation which follows 13:36-43, however, quite likely is an addition from Matthew and or the primitive Christian community rushing into judgement where there is fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth. Those were fearful times, but that does not sound like Jesus who in the original parable- spoke with its direct but difficult exhortation to "wait!" Before passing judgement and upsetting the balance of the real life as we live it, we are to be patient and kind.

The London poet, John Milton wrote; "Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned, that those confused seeds which were imposed on the Psyche (who had to sort them out) as an incessant labor. It was from the rind of one apple tasted (in the story of Adam and Eve) that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins together leapt forth into the world. And Milton goes on, perhaps this is the doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil."⁸

⁷ opp.cit.*Holy Bible*; Matthew 6:12;; 7:1-5; page 685 18:21-; page 695

⁸ Milton, John : *Areopagitica*: born December 9, 1608, Cheapside England, died November 8, 1674 London ; other notable work *Paradise Lost*: quoted in *Synthesis:Postscript* July 20, 2008,PMNSI Publisher, Boyds MD page 4. :

A point often overlooked in the parable of the wheat and the weeds- but a point full of good news to we worry-wart weeders- is the fact that although wheat and weeds were growing side by side, and despite the fact that an enemy planted the weeds, nevertheless the weeds posed no real threat to the wheat. In fact, the only threat to the wheat was posed by the well-meaning laborers (thats us!) who, in their efforts at weeding would have done as much damage to the wheat. In other words, in our attempts to clean up the problems of a situation, sometimes we are our own worst enemy.

But let us not make the mistake of reading today's gospel as a call to passivity in the face of evil. There is no divine commandment to ignore injustice in the world, nor violence in society. The challenge I see in this parable is to find a way to trust God. To trust that God knows what He is doing and has a plan for the weeds, so we don't have to worry about them.

AMEN

A SONG OF GOD'S STRENGTH IN MERCY

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19

Your care, O God, encompasses all creation!
Nor is there any god besides you.

To whom do you need to prove
that your judgements are just?

For your righteousness comes from your strength,
and your dominion makes way for your mercy;

for you show your might when mortals doubt your sovereignty;
you rebuke those who treat it with contempt.

Although you rule in boundless power,
you administer justice with mildness;

you govern us with great forbearance
though you are free to act without constraint.

You have taught your people by such deeds
that all who would be righteous must be kind.

You have filled your children with good hope
by stirring them to repent for their sins.