

Year A, Pentecost 6

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Let Anyone with Ears Listen!

“How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves? I ask this question because the gospel we have been tasked to interpret has insight on it but it won’t be a romp in the meadow to see it. Parables are challenging and this one particularly so. Quoting Isaiah and in the portion of the text the lectionary does not have us read, Jesus said he used parables because “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive, for this people’s hearts has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn---and I would heal them.” Jesus knows something in us resists seeing the truth to which the parables point and so parables twist on us and thrust us toward understandings that both upset and heal us in one move.

“He put before them another parable.” “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.” Something sinister has happened out in the fields. Evil has gotten mixed with good and now they come up together and until the harvest they look exactly alike.

In working with this text, Abbot Andrew Marr writes:

When we consider the workings of mimetic desire, (how we all desire what we see the other having or wanting) the image of a field densely filled with plants intertwined with each other is easily seen as an image of our entanglement with the desires of other people, some of whose desires we covet, others we try to separate ourselves from. Of course, each person who wants something we want and we don’t think it can be shared, is an enemy, a weed who should be pulled out, expelled from the garden. In such a situation, each of us is prone to considering ourselves to be one of the intended, desirable plants while the others are weeds. (I wheat, you weed) Of course, when we are preoccupied with how “weedy” everybody else is, we are totally wrapped up with them in our hostility. It is easy, then, to understand this parable as teaching us to mind our own business and not worry about everybody else.

This is a helpful interpretation and provides good psychological insight but does it go deep enough? Does it address our question of how we can oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?

The slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?’ They are shocked at the presence of weeds. They seem disappointed and angry that the beautiful field that held so much promise has now turned from a perfect field into a

field marred by weeds. Good farmers hate weeds. They are like flags of accusation waving in the wind. With an inquisitional tone they ask “Where then did these weeds come from?” Where does evil come from? Why did you allow it? We hate it and want to get rid of it as soon as possible.

I am surprised the householder does not take offense at the slave’s question, designed as it is, to blame the householder for planting bad seed. Instead he calming says “An enemy has done this.” He seems to know what happened and not to be surprised. Maybe he knew this would happen all along. You give humans freedom and they will misuse it and create havoc. Does the kingdom of God know how the human heart works? Does it know that good and evil get all tangled together and impossible to separate though humans will always try? Does it have a way of opposing evil that does not entangle us in more evil?

The slaves are very eager to make the field pure again. Master, set us loose on the weeds and we will tear them out. We are at your service and ready to go. You just say the word.

Tragically this week’s news illustrates the wheat and weeds dilemma. If we are Israel we say “we will deal with this Palestinian problem. We will weed out Hamas.” If we are Hamas we say “we will continue to attack the Israelis so they will show their “weedy-ness” to the world in how many of us they kill.” Do you see how both sides are attempting to get rid of evil? Each sees the other as the weed that must be destroyed. Could it be the weed sowed in the good field is the human tendency to see the other as evil? We say they are the problem and getting rid of them is the solution and that’s our problem. Maybe that’s the seed sown by an enemy.

Eagerly, the slave asks, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” “No,” answers the householder, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” It’s so hard to tell wheat from weeds and they are so entangled. Our eyes lack discernment and our hands are so clumsy. Truth is we are all an entangled mat of good and evil and attempting to throw out the evil before the harvest will destroy us. We had better hope to be left alone and let God sort it out where the criteria is Romans 3:22b-25a that reads:

For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his, effective through faith blood (This sacrifice is to our violence, I might add, not God’s .).

All along we have been thinking about how to oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves. There is a way of doing it but it will require the parable to twist in a new way. What if Jesus were the weed we pulled out? We saw him as evil because he had taken on the care and concern for the poor, the broken, the excluded and all those we ordinarily desire to remove from within our boundaries. In allowing himself to become the weed we reject, he reveals the weedy-ness of human culture, a culture that does cause weeping and gnashing of teeth to those it rejects.

Matthew 11:12 is a strange verse that some argue is the interpretive key to Matthew. It reads “From the day of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and

the violent take it by force.” Maybe those wishing to participate in the kingdom of heaven do join those the majority reject and with them suffer their violence. Isn’t that what Jesus did in the cross? He suffered violence rather than inflict it. Maybe that’s one of the ways we join Jesus and reveal truth. Maybe Jesus is at our southern border and appearing in the form of a child.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church has issued a statement on the current crisis of unaccompanied children and families at the United States border. While this has no official bearing for us as United Methodists, it is worth thinking about as we study the parable of the wheat and the weeds. She writes:

The influx of vulnerable people from Central America, including unaccompanied minors as well as mothers with children, continues to challenge the United States to respond compassionately. Like Sudanese or Syrian refugees, these people are fleeing hunger, violence, and the fear of rape, murder, and enslavement. The violence in Central America has escalated significantly in recent months, particularly as a result of gangs and trafficking in drugs and human beings. These people are literally fleeing for their lives.

The United States has a checkered history in responding to refugee crises. We shut our eyes and ears, as well as our ports, during the crimes against Jews and other vulnerable persons in the midst of the Second World War. We have been more welcoming to Sudanese youths looking for survival in the last 20 years. The Episcopal Church believes we have a responsibility to all our neighbors, particularly the strangers and sojourners around us....

Episcopalians are responding with prayers and concern, and asking how to help. I urge you to remember these people and their difficult and dangerous position in your prayers—today, and continuing until we find a just resolution.

I would also encourage you to contact your legislators, and ask them to support an appropriate humanitarian response to this crisis. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keeper, and as a Church, we are asking the United States government to support such a response, grounded in justice and the fundamental dignity of every human being.

“How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves? We join Jesus in suffering it. “Let anyone with ears listen!”