

Psalm 86:11-13, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

24 He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field, **25** but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. **26** So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. **27** 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?’ **28** He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ **29** But he replied, ‘No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. **30** Let both of them 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.’ ”

36 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.” **37** He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; **38** the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, **39** and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. **40** Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. **41** The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin[a] and all evildoers, **42** and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. **43** Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Prayer

Loving God, fill us with your presence and your spirit as we listen for your word for us this day. Open us to you and to one another. Amen

Adel Bestavros (1924–2005) was an Egyptian lawyer and a preacher and scholar of the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church. He said, “Patience with others is Love. Patience with self is Hope. Patience with God is Faith.”

Weeds and Seeds

I decided this week that I like the gospel of Matthew. Confession: I have a feeling I probably say that about each one of the gospels in turn as we work our way through them each liturgical year. The different voices and perspectives of the gospel writers lift up the Gospel with a capital 'G', the Good News of Jesus Christ, in such powerful ways, each lens, each voice, adding its own nuances to our growth in faith and life together.

This week I decided I like Matthew all over again though for, among other reasons, its strong community focus. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago when I preached, Matthew so much seems to speak to, and for, a *community of faithful*, giving us a strong reminder that we are in this together. That yes, we definitely need God who we come to know in Jesus Christ, but we also need one another for this faith journey of ours.

Matthew holds us accountable to one another, keeps us mindful of the fact that ours is not a faith in isolation. In fact, ours is a faith of community. Matthew may have been written 2000 years ago but it still rings true. Some questions are, for better or worse, always relevant no matter when or where a community of faith gathers.

This week we pick up right where Irene left off with her sermon last week. We are in the midst of a series of parables, the heart of Matthew's gospel, both literally, we are in the middle of the book, and theologically. Parables were Jesus' method of choice for teaching. Jesus' parables never let us off easily, making us think about ourselves about our community, about God. It was through parables that Jesus so often addressed the difficult questions.

Last week we heard the parable of the sower who sowed her seeds all kinds of places, extravagantly, knowing that some will take root and bear fruit thirty, sixty and one hundred fold.

This week we have another parable about a sower and her harvest but this time there is a much darker side to the story. In these parables and their accompanying interpretations, we hear the church's wrestling with some difficult questions. Last week's question seemed to be, 'why does this sower sow with so much reckless abandon?' 'Doesn't she know better than to sow seeds in such where they almost certainly won't take root?' 'And why does this Gospel, this good news *we* know of

Jesus Christ, that we share in our community, why does fail to take root sometimes in others, or even in ourselves sometimes? And what is our role, as a church, as individuals, here and now?’

This week’s text addresses the church’s concern with another set of questions. ‘How is it that there is still, despite God’s goodness, despite this community of faith that Christ has given to us, how is it that there is still so much brokenness, so much evil and suffering in the world?’ And again, ‘What is our role in the face of this? What should we do about it?’ Some questions don’t ever go away, do they?

To these familiar questions of ‘why God?’ and ‘what now?’ the church of Matthew’s day heard this response from Jesus. This parable is interesting. Matthew is the only gospel writer to include this parable. This problem of suffering and evil and hurt must have been discussed often at the session meetings and the potlucks of the first church of Jesus Christ in Matthew’s day. “Where did this evil come from? What are we to do about it?”

The answer once again, as Jesus’ answers so often do, surprises.

Weeds are pesky things. I heard them once defined as anything that grows where you don’t want it to. Like last week, I imagine the gardeners among us can within identify immediately with this text. Weeds - get them out as soon as possible before they over power that which we have planted and want to nurture and see grow.

Notice Jesus does not spend much time in this parable dealing with the how and why of the weeds, “the enemy came while everybody was asleep and sowed the weeds among the wheat. When the plants came up and bore grain the weeds appeared as well.” When the slaves came and said, “Master, did you not sow good seed? Where then did these weeds come from?” No long discussion on how or why bad things happen. The master replied simply, ‘an enemy has done this.’”

There is that among us and even within us, which works against the good seed. It comes. It grows up among us, within us even, and one day we wake up and recognize it there, and wonder, what do I do next.

Jesus continues, “When the slaves replied to the master, ‘then do you want us to go and gather in the weeds?’ the master said, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until harvest.’” Not the answer we expect.

I imagine the church of Matthew's day was wrestling mightily with their sense of calling and their place in the world. They were a Christian church of Jewish descent working to welcome a new population of gentile, non Jewish Christians. And they were a new Christian community in an often hostile Roman empire. It must have been getting more and more difficult to differentiate between the seed and the weed among them.

Sometimes the people and the situations that seemed to hold so much promise turned out to have a devastating destructive influence on the community. Other times those who caused the most trouble, seemed the most divisive, turned out to be the ones truly sent from God. It would have been so much easier if they had a clear way of calling a weed a weed and then promptly pulling it up by the roots and tossing it out!

We humans have a strong desire to make things either/or, right and left, good and bad, sinful and saintly. It just makes things easier! Pull out that weed and toss it! "An enemy has done this. Do you want us to go and gather them in?" But in the face of this need of ours Jesus says, 'No'. Sometimes in our zeal to rid ourselves of the bad we destroy the good as well. Jesus saw this. The community did too.

The agrarian people of Jesus' day who first heard this parable would have known that when weeds and wheat grow together their roots intertwine. To pull the weeds would have meant destroying the young wheat plants too. The farmers who heard this story would also have known that the kind of weeds that grow among wheat look just like wheat plants when the two are young. It would be impossible to pull only the weeds and leave the good seed to grow. Things are often not as either/or as we would like them to be. In our world. In our churches. In ourselves. And, we after all, are not the master. It is not our decision to make.

This story of course is not telling Jesus' followers to sit passively by and let evil happen. That was not Jesus' way at all. Rather, this parable of Jesus is addressing that tendency in us to rush to take care of business. Pull out those weeds. Root out the evil. This parable is a reminder that sometimes, often even, the relationship between evil and good is complicated. We can see it in our communities, as Matthew's first hearers almost certainly did. We can see it in ourselves. Remember when Paul writes in Romans, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:19) Evil exists. It lives alongside what is good inside us, in our communities, in our world.

Maybe the message of this parable then is patience. Jesus says wait. Be patient. When you find yourself rushing to judge, stop. Think. Pray. Maybe Jesus knew how very difficult this is for us - anxious weed pullers that we are - that we need to be reminded that ultimately we do not have the ability to get rid of all the weeds and that sometimes attempts to pluck up those weeds causes more harm than good. Be careful of that within us that wants to pass judgement.

New Testament scholar Eugene Boring I think puts it well with regard to this difficult parable that pulls at us in multiple directions. He writes, “Are we lost forever, then, in a hopelessly compromised world? No, the parable contains the promise that, in the wisdom of God, the weeds will ultimately be destroyed. Evil is temporary; only the good endures. The parable leads finally, then to a place of joy and hope. We live in an imperfect world, and no human effort can eradicate that fact. But that was never our job anyway. We are given the task of living as faithfully and as obediently as possible, confident that the harvest is sure.”¹

Evil is temporary; only the good endures. I began our sermon time together this morning with a quote from Adel Bestavros in which he said, “Patience with others is Love. Patience with self is Hope. Patience with God is Faith.”

May we actively live our patient faith this day and always. Amen.

¹ Boring, M. Eugene, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. 8, pg. 311.