

The latter part of this week I attended a Clergy Conference for justice (with others from Greenville representing GOAL) in Orlando, FL. While there, one of my colleagues shared about a situation where a pastor from another church reached out to him and invited him to dinner. While at dinner, the pastor from the other church confronted my colleague about hiring someone who was in need of repentance and how the guy hired and the hiring pastor, having known this, would be judged by God. The inviting pastor was basically saying to my friend and colleague, "How dare you hire such a bad person?" I sat and listened in disbelief...but not really. As I said last week, who are we to hold judgment? Yes, we can offer to hold people accountable and walk our imperfect faith journeys together but other than that, we can't say who is in and who is out- who is evil and who is good- though many of us wish we could. We can't condemn people to hell no more than we can predict what is going to happen to us tomorrow or next month. "Jesus' preaching and actions provide the means by which people can discern his identity as God's agent and encounter God's saving presence and kingdom. But as chapters 11 and 12 in Matthew's Gospel have shown, many, both the elite and others, fail to discern Jesus' identity and oppose his ministry. God's reign brings division" (Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*). The parables of Jesus are part of his message about the kingdom or reign of God. Today's parable, the Parable of the Weeds, falls first in a series of three: the other two being the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Yeast. The Parable of the Weeds or Tare, as Bronwyn sang earlier, is one of seven parables in Chapter 13. It begins, like many of the other parables, "The kingdom of heaven is like...."

This parable explores some of the most ancient questions that humankind has ever posed: “Why do the wicked prosper? Wouldn’t divine justice be better served by destroying them? Should not those who are good destroy the wicked on God’s behalf” (Justo Gonzalez, *Three Months With Matthew*)? Remember while listening to God’s Word for us this day that the focus on God’s reign and its eventual triumph over all things implies the demise of Rome. You see when today’s text was written, Rome thought it had imperial claims to sovereignty over the world. However, it did not. God is the only One who controls the world’s destiny and asserts sovereignty over the world (Carter). This is the Good News and before I get ahead of myself, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Matthew 13:24-30.**

The servants come to the farmer/landowner and ask him, “Master, didn’t you plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds” (v. 27)? Jesus doesn’t give much of an answer except to say that it was the enemy who planted the weeds (v. 28a). What if Jesus is saying in today’s parable that “the kingdom is like someone sowing good seed *and* an enemy sowing seeds of poison, helter-skelter, on top of them. Just as the parable allows weeds to stand with wheat or tare, the kingdom includes an enemy presence busily at work in the dark”(Duke). What if the presence of evil in the parable is not a mistake? “Jesus states without flinching that evil is real, insidious, intentional, and dangerous. The weeds Jesus describes are intentionally sown into the field by a real enemy whose motivations are loveless and sinister. Moreover, the literal weeds (which many scholars believe to be *darnel*- ‘false wheat’) are NOT harmless; they’re poisonous. They mimic the look and color of nourishing grain, but they’re fake, and

their seeds can cause illness and even death if consumed in large quantities” (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.org). Those listening recognize the danger of the weeds being in the field with the wheat.

The anxious servants asked him, “Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?” But the landowner turned them down saying that if they were to gather the weeds, they will also pull up the wheat with them. Therefore, let them grow together- side by side- until the harvest (vv. 29-30a). Although the Parable of the Weeds, the Mustard Seed, and the Yeast do not make the same point; “they share images of unwanted elements, the mixing of ‘good’ with ‘bad,’ and the perception of threat” (Duke). Do what, Jesus? That’s not what you’re supposed to say! At this point I must ask with which character you identify most in today’s parable? If you’re feeling good about yourself and your righteous living, you’re most likely to say the wheat. If you don’t feel so good about yourself and feel as if you’re resisting or hindering God’s reign, you may say the weeds. If you’re identifying as a disciple, you may go with the servants. The challenge is that many of us, who seek God’s reign, see ourselves as the wheat and/or the servants who would like to identify and eliminate the weeds. “This parable points to a great danger confronting those who have decided for the reign of God. The church must be morally and doctrinally pure, and we then set out to achieve this. The result is a church that, rather than a community of joy and gratitude for the salvation that has been attained and or the promised reign of God, becomes a judge for its members, watching over them as only a totalitarian state can do” (Gonzalez). This is what it sounded like my friend and colleague was describing. What about our unwise inclinations to attack

what we judge to be evil? We must pay attention that two weeks in a row, who gets to judge has been the teaching from Jesus, as are the two other parables that follow today's parable. It's as if we need daily reminders. I know I do. I confess that when my friend and colleague told me the story of him being judged for hiring a certain person who was in need of repentance, I immediately judged that pastor and the church where he serves. Aren't we all in need of repentance? Last time I checked we're all desperate sinners standing in the need of prayer and of God's redeeming grace. Yet, who am I to say if this pastor is wheat or weeds? Because truth be told...I wonder if we all aren't a little of both?! For just at the point we presume to know what is evil and place ourselves above it to destroy it, we become evil. We all have the great capacity to hurt and damage others just as we have the great capacity to love and to do good. Everywhere we look, evil mixes in with good and much like today's story, they both often look alike for a while and thus are hard to tell apart. "We are, like the field in the parable, both mixed and messy. Each of us individually, our faith communities corporately, and our world in its entirety, contain wheat and weed, good and evil, the fruitful and the poisonous. We are each, in Martin Luther's famous words, 'at the same time both sinner and saint.' To confess this is not to be harsh or strict religiously- it is to be discerning and wise. It is to live in reality. And it is to believe Jesus" (Thomas).

"The tragedy is precisely in what the parable warns: In the process of pulling up the weeds, the wheat is also damaged. When the church supported the Inquisition, those who suffered were not only the heretics who were burned at stake but the entire church. When one of us, or a

group within the church, becomes a guardian of somebody else's morality, a great deal of damage may ensue for whomever we condemn. But also the entire church suffers damage, for it loses its character as a community of faith and love. It is NOT our task to separate weeds from the wheat. God will do this at the proper time. Our task is to bear fruit, to produce our own wheat" (Gonzalez).

But "there is more to be gleaned about evil from this parable than the fact that it is real and harmful. Jesus also says without apology that evil is doomed" (Thomas). When it's time to harvest the wheat, the landowner will instruct the harvesters to gather, bundle, and burn the weeds but bring the wheat into his barn" (v. 30b). This image makes many of us uncomfortable. "What does our discomfort say about us and about our location, vis-à-vis injustice, oppression, cruelty, and suffering? What version of divine 'love' are we preaching if it doesn't include a finale of justice for the world's most broken and desperate people? What is compassion, in the end, without justice? Without an embodied realization of the good and the whole and the restored and the abundant? If there will never be an actual making right for the most victimized among us, then what is the Gospel, and why are we bothering with it? What is the Good News of Christianity? In his ultimately eschatological parable, Jesus promises his listeners that justice is both necessary for an abundant harvest, and certain because God wills it. Yes, the weeds may win out in this lifetime- Jesus doesn't deny the grim reality of life here and now. Evil may claim victory for many seasons, lifetimes, generations. But the passionate, protective, and deeply righteous love of God will not suffer evil to rule the world forever. No. Rome will not

stay in power forever. No. With Jesus, oppression will end. Injustice will die. The wheat will thrive and the weeds will not. All causes of evil and evildoers will be exposed and disempowered. All causes of evil. The causes will condemn in others, and the causes we complacently excuse in ourselves. The causes that are personal and the causes that are systemic. The causes we know, and the causes we don't. All causes of evil. No exceptions. In short, all that chokes, starves, breaks, distorts, poisons, and harms God's beloved, will burn away. Not because God hates the world. But because God loves it" (Thomas). So, what's our response to evil? We must acknowledge it and then practice restraint. Like the servants, we can get worked up about some weeds. Maybe weeds in our own lives but more so, if we're honest, weeds in others' lives. Sometimes we may find ourselves saying, "Jesus, trust me, I know how to separate the weeds from the wheat. Let me at it, please, and I'll have that field cleared for you in no time! Why wait? Let's settle the question of who is good, and who is bad. Who belongs and who does not." But Jesus says no. No and wait. We are not competent to discern. What we judge to be evil may bear more good than we know. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor shares that Jesus knows that this kind of discernment is much harder than we can imagine. She says, "Turn us loose with a machete and there is no telling what we will chop down and what we will spare." Even if we're correct in our judgments, charging into mixed fields with machetes and weed eaters does inevitable harm. "Our only job is simply to bless the field, not curse it. Remember, the field is not ours; it is God's. Only God knows it intimately enough to tend it. Only God loves it enough to bring it safely to harvest" (Thomas). Thanks be to God that God,

who loves the impure field and who is the author of salvation and the ultimate judge, is in charge and we're not. So let's put our machetes and weed eaters down and hold on, trusting in God's promises to have the final victory through Jesus Christ. Amen.