“Kingdom of Dirt: The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat”

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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 19, 2020

Well. This is…something. As I began to work on this text for this sermon, I was trying to remember what I was thinking when I decided to preach on it! Because this story, this parable, is difficult. I don’t want to hear a parable about weeds sown in with the wheat, about evil and goodness, growing together side by side in the field of the world, followed by some cosmic harvest and burning at the end of the age.

That’s not really where I am these days. I want to hear good news.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field. Yes, Jesus, yes – tell us about this good seed, being sown in a good field, good soil – he already told us about the soil.

But then, after the good seed is sown in the good field by a good person – while everyone is asleep, an enemy comes and sows weeds in the field, too! So sneaky – because the planter and his household don’t even know it’s happened until the plants start to grow, and then it becomes clear what has taken place.

Now, these aren’t just any weeds – the word used in the original Greek is *Zizania*, which could be any number of wild grains or grasses. However, scholars believe that these weeds were *Lolium temulentum* or Darnel Ryegrass. This plant is poisonous to people and cattle, and is virtually indistinguishable from wheat until it fruits and bears seeds. The grains on actual wheat are heavy and will weigh the plant down, causing it to bend over, but *Lolium temulentum* will continue to stand up straight. This is how the folks in our parable discovered the weeds – “when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.”

*Lolium temulentum* is a pest plant, with even its seeds similar in size and shape to wheat, classified in many countries as a noxious weed, which means farmers can go to any length to remove it from their land, as just a handful of these seeds can ruin a crop.

It makes sense that the workers – enslaved people, unfortunately, in this story – would want to dig these noxious weeds up as soon as discovering them. But the householder wants to wait. While the plants are still growing, the difference between weed and wheat isn’t always clear, and he doesn’t want to lose even one head of grain. He knows it will be easier to spot the difference once the plants are ready for harvest, because at that point the wheat will be bent over, heavy with grain, and the weeds will remain standing upright, easy to see, and easy to remove.

And, even then, it isn’t up to his enslaved workers to remove – the householder says “the reapers” will bundle up the weeds to be burned – a surefire way to destroy this persistent plant and keep even one seed from making its way into next season’s crop. And the wheat will be harvested as planned, and gathered into the barn of the householder.

OK.

If we were to keep reading straight through Matthew’s gospel, we would hear a few more little parables – more of “the kingdom of heaven is like…” But our lectionary passage – the 3-year cycle of readings assigned to each Sunday – leaves those bits out and assigns them to next week – you’ll get to hear Pastor Jennie preach about the mustard seed. Our passage skips ahead to after the crowds have dispersed and the disciples have questions for Jesus – “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.”

And Jesus, ever patient, breaks it down, and here’s where I – and most Presbyterians, I imagine – start to get uncomfortable:

The sower is the Son of Man,

the field is the world,

the good seed are the children of the kingdom,

the weeds are the children of the evil one,

the enemy who sowed them is the devil,

the harvest is the end of the age,

and the reapers are angels.

OK. That escalated quickly.

The move from telling a story about planting good seeds in good soil to the devil and angels and “harvesting” seems a bit fast. And this part:

“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.”

Yikes.

I have to confess: I have some religious baggage. Many of us do, I know, particularly those of us Presbyterians who were raised in the Bible Belt. I grew up attending a small, fairly traditional PC(USA) church, I loved Sunday School and Youth Group when I was in middle school, but when I got to high school, something shifted in the youth ministry, there were new staff and volunteers, and the focus of the curriculum changed.

I had grown up being taught about God’s love, God’s grace, God’s call to mercy and justice – feed the hungry, help those less fortunate than myself, etc. I was never in doubt that God loved me, and that God wanted me to love others – to love my neighbors. But in Sunday School and Bible Study, we began to learn about salvation – and that it wasn’t just a given – it was something we had to seek after, ask for, and accept. We had to “pray the sinner’s prayer,” and “ask Jesus into our hearts.”

OK, I could get on board with that. But here was the kicker – I was taught that even if I did those things, I could never be sure that it took, that it worked; I could never trust that my intentions were pure and correct as I prayed – and so my salvation was never a sure thing. And of course, with so much emphasis on salvation, one had to wonder, “salvation from what? from what are we being saved?” Easy: from hellfire, damnation, eternal torment for forever at the hands of the devil in a literal, physical hell.

This had somehow never come up at church before now – and I was horrified and terrified. I also learned in Bible Study that the devil wasn’t just content to hang out in hell, but he was actively trying to harm me, and so my own soul wasn’t just at risk of my own lacking intentions as I prayed; it was at risk from the devil literally coming to snatch me.

And my friends and family – their salvation was in my hands – I was trained to try to convert – to save – everyone I knew. I spent many sleepless nights praying in fear – terror, really – also praying in grief for the people I loved who I believed were at risk. That’s a lot for a 15 year-old to bear.

Eventually, I stopped going to Sunday School and youth group and Bible Study – it was too much – and I began to realize that what I was being taught didn’t line up with everything else I had been taught about grace and love, and in the world of my culturally-diverse high school, I just couldn’t understand how God could want to punish my Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim friends, my LGBTQ friends, my friends whose parents were divorced.

It took a few more years for me to find my place again in Christianity, for me to realize that I even *had* a place – that those particular teachings weren’t universal – and I’m still in recovery, I might claim.

This passage, with its weeds and wheat and furnace of fire, was one that was used to “prove” to my teenage self that you never know where you stand with God – are you wheat? or are you a weed? Check your heart – where are you destined at harvest time? *<Shudder>*

The good news is – all of that is wrong. It’s a bad reading of this text, and a bad reading of the whole rest of the Bible. God isn’t trying to trick us with super complicated requirements for salvation, in fact, salvation isn’t about what happens when we die.

Jesus said – and we can trust him – that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. This is what we are talking about this month in this worship series – the kingdom of heaven isn’t elsewhere, otherworldly or another dimension – it’s here, on earth, in the dirt, the seeds, the wheat.

The kingdom of heaven is a political reality – I know, we don’t want the church to be political – but the truth is we cannot be faithful and avoid it. We need to reclaim this word, this idea, because what this means is that we are called to act, to join God in acting in the public sphere –to live out our call to justice, to mercy, to feed and clothe and visit and care in public, actively working against the systems that keep any of God’s children impoverished and oppressed. The entire foundation of the Church is the call to participate in the kingdom of heaven, which is a political statement that Jesus staked his career and his life on – it’s why he was executed by the state. “The kingdom of heaven” is an intentional statement by Jesus to oppose the kingdoms of this world – the Roman Empire, in his case, the occupying regime in his native Israel.

It’s why Jesus sometimes talks about God, or himself, as sitting on a throne – this wasn’t just a metaphor like it seems to be for us, it was an actual claim of power and authority, one that upset the Empire so much that they had him killed.

In fact, the statement “Jesus is Lord,” that today feels like a vague statement of religious faith, then was a political claim – because if Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not. It was a renunciation of the Empire – treason. Christianity – the movement to follow Jesus and what he taught – is political.

What Christianity is *not* is partisan – the Church is not called to a particular political party nor to endorse any particular candidate – and any church that claims otherwise is misinformed.

So, what we have established: God isn’t out to get us, (and neither is “the devil,” but that’s another sermon for another day) and the kingdom of heaven is a political reality here and now, meant to be actively participated in by the followers of Jesus.

Let’s look again at Jesus’s explanation of this parable.

The field is the world. There is wheat – good seeds sown by the Son of Man, a title from our Old Testament that Jesus sometimes chooses for himself, and there is evil.

Well, this is no surprise – we already know this is true. There is evil in the world – evil that sprouts up seemingly overnight, as if someone had sneaked into a field and planted weeds among the wheat.

In this parable, the good seeds are children of the kingdom of heaven, those who participate in God’s realm in the here and now. And so the weeds – evil – this is all that is in opposition to the kingdom of heaven.

And while the weeds and wheat are indistinguishable at first, eventually they become easy enough to spot, right? Because Jesus has been super clear about what the kingdom of heaven looks like he has spent 13 chapters telling us about it, and will spend many more, for those of us who’ve read the book already:

The kingdom of heaven is marked by compassion and love,

with an ethic of mercy: “treat others the way you want them to treat you;

it is marked by healing of disease, injury, and emotional trauma; (Matt 8-12)

it comes about through God’s abundant grace; (Matt 13)

it requires humility, putting the needs of others above your own; (Matt 18-19)

it is manifested in care for “the least of these,” in a way that becomes a lifestyle, second-nature to those doing it. (Matt 25)

This is what the kingdom of heaven is about, what we are to be about as we join God at work in this world, where the kingdom is wheat growing, breaking in, it’s inaugurated, but not yet fully-realized; it isn’t yet complete and ready for the harvest.

We will know it’s complete when all that is evil, all that stands against God’s kingdom, God’s empire, all that harms, causes pain and suffering, is burned away. And the good news is we aren’t responsible for collecting those weeds – that’s God’s work – God is the one who ultimately deals with evil in the world.

Friends, the world is full of weeds: full of terror and pain and hurt and suffering, full of greed and systems of privilege and oppression: Racism, poverty, consumerism, destruction of the earth and its resources, abusers and harrassers, leaders who abuse their power, bigotry and hatred – all these terrible evils and more exist in the kingdoms of the world.

BUT.

BUT, There *is* hope.

In these parables that Jesus tells, we hear and claim a new, and yet ancient, hope that evil does *not*, all these things do *not* have the final word. Jesus, a ruler unlike any other the world has known, offers hope in these uncertain times, a glimmer of light shining in the darkness. Jesus patiently and confidently tends the field, trusting the seeds he has already planted.

It’s appropriate, then, that Jesus never arrived into his kingdom like a king should or would – he arrived in the world as a poor Palestinian child, and later he arrived in Jerusalem on a donkey, with palm branches lining the street.

BUT.

King he is. King of Kings, Lord of Lords. Sovereign God Incarnate, friend of sinners, hope for the hopeless, light of the world, preacher of Good News, barefoot in a kingdom of dirt, sowing good seeds, season after season, awaiting the harvest with hope.

# Works Cited

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