

Matthew 13:24-30 (NRSV)

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. 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 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.’ ”

Building up the Wheat

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: July 20, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Matthew 13:24-30

Close observers will wonder why I have left out the second part of the parable of the wheat and tares in this morning's scripture passage. In verses 24-30, which we heard, Jesus tells the story in which a neighbor has befouled the landowner's wheat field. The neighbor snuck in under the cover of darkness and sowed weeds among the wheat seeds. The seeds of both germinated, and now the field is spoiled, weeds crowd out the wheat. In verses 36 through 43, which we didn't hear, Jesus explains the parable to his disciples. He explains the story as an allegory for the end times, when the Son of Man will come at the harvest and separate the good from the bad, the weeds from the good grain. The parable and the explanation form a unit. So, why would I leave out the half with Jesus' explanation this morning?

In this case Biblical scholars tell us there is good evidence that the story we read significantly predates the explanation. That is, the story we read existed on its own well before Jesus' explanation of it. That simply means that the story once had a point of its own. Specifically, the parable itself is far less about the end times than the explanation is. The original story was meant to address a present moment, life circumstances. In the original story the landowner isn't just a stand-in for God at the end of days, when the sheep and goats are separated, to use another of Matthew's metaphors. In the original story the conundrum is more at hand. The allegory points to the here and now. And the landowner is human.

Two neighbors are in a feud. They provoke one another with dirty tricks, like planting weed seeds in a field of wheat. As in most feuds, the exact beginnings are lost. What is certain, though, is that the enmity has grown and been fed by each round of the conflict. As time has gone on each neighbor has become more convinced of his own righteousness and the other's evil. Soon enough, the tit-for-tat actions of the feud have led each to characterize the other in archetypal terms. The neighbor is evil. The weeds sown in the field by the evil neighbor also come to symbolize evil. The neighbor and what the neighbor does fuse into an impassioned creed. The feud becomes larger than life. It's not just a spoiled field. The landowner ponders how to deal with everything the neighbor represents—evil itself. When the landowner's workers ask if they should pull out and gather the weeds, underlying the question is, do you want us to uproot and gather this evil, which is polluting the good? Even before the parable takes on the apocalyptic dimensions portrayed in the subsequent explanation, its theme, like the feud it narrates, becomes mythical in proportions. It is the battle between good and evil.

At this level the parable allows us to pose the question, then, how are we to proceed in this epic battle? What are we to do about wrong and injustice? John the Baptist represented one option, the one suggested by the landowner's workers. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees," says John early in the Gospel. "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire," he continues. John, like others of his compatriots down in the Dead Sea environs, opted for immediate purification, immediate separation of the unrighteous from the righteous.

The landowner in our parable this morning takes a more measured approach. He says, wait. Let things develop. There will be time when the harvest comes to make the separation.

Notice how already the landowner's approach calms the urgent fury to do something rash and excessive.

The landowner makes a very wise argument. The gardeners among you know that pulling weeds, even when there are but a few, is delicate business. It's easy to destroy the plants you are trying to save. All the more, when the field is overrun by weeds. It's an impossible and frustrating situation. Weeds abound, and the parable cautions that any sweeping purification will cause more harm than good.

There's another dimension, too. The exact weed, *Zizania* in the Greek, is hard to identify. The word appears in the literature only in this parable. What is clear in the parable, though, is that *Zizania* is hard to distinguish from the wheat until the grain appears on the stalks. Feuding parties hate this phenomenon. Once the feud takes on the dimensions of good versus evil, the participants have no doubt which side is evil—the other side, and what percentage evil they are—100%. It's what makes so many disputes intractable, whether they are with your next door neighbor or on the world stage. Look at the rhetoric in the halls of congress. Look at the viewpoints traded back and forth on the Middle East. Knotted faces spout cast-iron convictions, furious that their opponents are too stupid, even too evil, to see the truth. But the parable cautions that the weeds and the wheat are not so easy to differentiate as we might wish.

The Protestant reformers got it right on this issue. Our fallenness is most evidenced by our self-referential nature, our hearts and minds are curved in on themselves, to paraphrase Luther. Self-centeredness and smugness distort our vision. Logic and data are no matches for what we believe. And what we believe betrays an all too close correspondence with what we want to believe. Self-serving and calcified positions masquerade as truth. Fr. Brian Hehir is fond of saying that original sin is the one doctrine of the church for which there is empirical evidence. I think he's right about that.

In the wheat field this human condition puts us in a double bind. The differences between the weeds and the wheat are often subtle and complex. We don't like the ambiguity. We tend to jump to self-serving and crystal-clear conclusions. Our inferences may often be wrong or overstated. Yet we convince ourselves so thoroughly about what is weed and what is wheat that we enshrine our perspectives in indisputability, very often in holy indisputability.

But of course this line of argument begs a fair question. Are we to refrain from making moral judgments? May we not act against evil and for justice? Do the complexity of the world and the corrupt state of the human condition consign us to passivity lest we do more harm than good?

Frankly, it is difficult. The risk of enshrining our biases and views on things as Gospel truth is very real. Our ideas of right and wrong map all too well onto what we want to believe. When we find God agreeing with us all the time, we are probably listening to ourselves rather than God. We too easily take out human inventions and drape them in sacred raiment.

But we are right to believe in moral action. We cannot just stand by in the face of great injustice and wickedness. But we have to accept that even our best-intentioned actions have a partial, uncertain and incomplete truth. Rather than moral absolutes, the most we can achieve are essentially preliminary, uncertain, and contested ideas of what is right. We can only do the best we can do, and always be open to rethinking. It takes both courage and humility, a rare combination, to make moral decisions while at the same time acknowledging their serious limitations. It takes courage and humility to act and yet truly understand that our actions may well be products of our own invention or clouded interpretations of God's will. Such actions, then—provisional, uncertain and incomplete, as they are—should be approached not only with humility, but also with caution. Since our moral judgments are imperfect, we should seek to destroy as little as possible when we decide to uproot evil. In the case of the parable, the landowner decided that waiting until the harvest was the best course of action. I daresay we will

and should often opt for action against the injustices we see earlier in the season. But whenever we take such moral action, we must grapple with and take seriously that we see through a glass darkly; we can but partially sort out the complexities and ambiguities. Always we will need always to listen for the Holy Spirit, which may nudge us into a different direction, which may cause us to change our minds.

As we act trying to resist evil responsibly, the parable leaves open another far less contested avenue of action as well. The parable doesn't explicitly take it up, but as he tells the parable this other avenue can hardly be far from Jesus' or his disciples mind. The whole of Jesus ministry in the Gospel of Matthew is built on the foundation of the Sermon on the Mount. For four full chapters, beginning just after Jesus calls his disciples, Jesus pours out a veritable cornucopia of actions and attitudes, not about how to fight evil, but about how to do good. Blessed are the merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers. Let your light shine. Seek reconciliation with your brothers and sisters. Love your enemies. Be careful in judging others. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do not deceive yourself. Be a doer as well as a hearer.

On the solid footing of the Sermon on the Mount Matthew builds the edifice of Jesus' Gospel.

The Apostle Paul writing earlier than Matthew and not long after Jesus' death sounds a similar refrain. In letter after letter—in Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and 1 Thessalonians—Paul says again and again, build up the community, build up rather than tear down, build up the body of Christ, build up in love for one another. Were he to paraphrase this morning's parable, he might have said, Build up the wheat; don't just tear down the weeds.

I'm not enough of a wheat farmer to know what building up the wheat would look like in this parable. Maybe being sure it gets enough water and nutrients. I don't know.

But this much is clear. The parable, in its earliest form, identifies its hearers with the landowner, not with God. The parable positions the landowner at the edge of the wheat field. In the midst of a feud with his neighbor, the landowner rightly understands the limits on his ability to root out evil, limitations born of the ambiguity of the very flora he might be tempted to purify, born of his limited wisdom of discernment, and born of the reality that in trying to uproot evil it is all too easy to do more harm than good. This is where John the Baptist and Jesus likely parted company.

Jesus is cautious about uprooting evil. He's seen that uprooting fall all too often on the backs of the poor and the sick and others at the margins, those who all too often were seen as weeds in his society. But Jesus is not cautious when it comes to building up the good. There he is utterly profligate. The Biblical scholar John Nolan nails it when he says, "... we have here a preference for focusing on the present as an opportunity for growth to maturity and a stronger interest in protecting the maturing good seed than in destroying the growing bad seed."¹ Let us pray. O god let us become ever more reckless in building up the wheat. Amen.

¹ Nolland John, *The Gospel of Matthew: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 548.