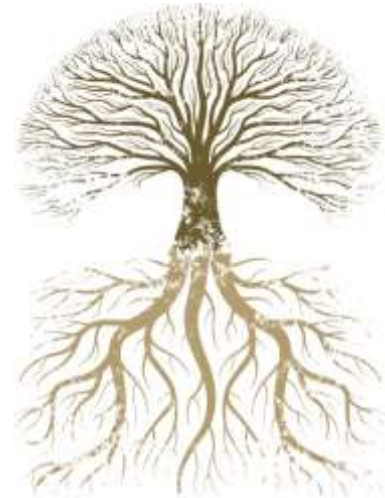


July 19, 2020
Eighteenth Sunday of Online Worship

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Identifying the Root

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43



Our second reading is from Matthew, chapter 13, beginning with verse 24, the Parable of weeds among the wheat:

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.'"

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." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 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. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Today's scripture reads to me as a sermon series and too complex to fit into 17 minutes on your TV screen. I have to say though that after reading it I was stopped in my tracks. Honestly, I was afraid to tackle this text. I wrestled with it for days, begging the Holy Spirit to shed light. Because why...how can I tell you kindly, prophetically...that evil does exist in this world... within us?

As a part of the human condition we are stumped by one question...why do bad things happen...you can finish that sentence...to good people? You can see why I was cautious to stick with our lectionary this morning...it tees up the biggest mic drop in theological study.

Why is there evil in the world...when God said after all of creation, "*and it was good.*"

When you wrestle with a text that has been given to you for your daily devotion or printed in your teacher's curriculum for high school Sunday school, you could turn the page and choose the next text, but where would the fun in that be; robbing yourself of a spiritual challenge? I continued to stew with this text, and sure enough the Holy Spirit began working through me, assisting me in this spiritual challenge. And another challenging thought occurred to me. What if **we** were to turn the table on God, and put our expectations as the reality we expect?

Where in the Bible does God promise that bad things won't happen to us or around us...that evil won't exist in the world? Instead this text proves a profound theological perspective, that evil will live among us and it won't be until the end of time when God will throw the causes of sin and evildoers into the furnace. This morning God has called us to change our perspective on how we view evil in the world. In order to do that let's take the journey I experienced this week and dive deeper into our text.

The farmer has sown good seed in his field for a healthy wheat harvest. *But in the dark of night an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. (13:24-26)*

A bit of botany is helpful in understanding this parable. Recently in creating a beautiful new backyard for myself, I downloaded an app called "Picture This." It allows you to take any picture of a plant, and then a full history and helpful tips will appear on your screen naming the plant in front of you.

Matthew uses the Greek term *zizania*, which in modern botanical terms refers to the genus of wild rice grasses. What Matthew most likely refers to, however, is darnel, a noxious weed that closely resembles wheat and is plentiful in Israel. The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident only when the plants mature and flowers appear. I had to look this up myself, so I pulled up my handy new app and searched the visual differences of darnel and wheat. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight. But otherwise they do look extremely similar until they mature and are ready for harvest.

When the farmer's workers notice the weeds, their first response is to question the quality of the seed. "*Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?*" (13:27) When the master replies that an enemy has sown the weeds, the slaves are anxious to take care of the problem, to root those nasty weeds right out. But the master restrains his servants, saying that in gathering the weeds they would uproot the wheat along with them. He orders them to let both grow together until the harvest. Then he will send out his reapers to collect and burn the weeds and to gather the wheat into his barn (13:28-30).

In the clearest of terms, Jesus tells his disciples what almost every element of the parable represents:

"The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels." (13:37-39)

Jesus does not, however, say whom the workers represent. Perhaps the workers represent the 12 disciples.

Who among us has not questioned why God allows evil to grow and thrive? Who among us has not wanted to take matters into our own hands and root out the evil in our midst? The farmer stops the workers from doing anything of the sort.

Jesus says that the reapers -- not the workers -- will take care of this at harvest time.

"The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect 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. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." (13:41-43)

It is the angels -- not any human beings -- who are authorized to pluck out the weeds from the wheat.

The people who gathered on that beach to hear Jesus tell them stories weren't much different from us. They also knew what it meant to experience evil and pain. They had experienced oppression from Rome. Even among their own people, they had watched the rich get richer while the poor became poorer. Life wasn't fair. How could God allow his people to continue to suffer, while evil seemed to flourish around them? When would the Messiah deliver them from this miserable existence, and bring judgment to Israel's oppressors?

The Kingdom of God is something I like to call "already-not-yet." The Kingdom of God has already broken into our world through the life of Jesus Christ, and is already at work among us through the Holy Spirit. But the kingdom has not yet reached its completion.

The kingdom is **becoming** – like a seed planted in a field.

We might wonder how can this be the kingdom of God, if evil is still present? And that might raise even more questions: why do we still see racial inequality...why is there still poverty...why does disease still claim so many lives...where is God in the suffering? So, you can see again, why I was so cautious to go down this road with you. One answer provides triple the amount of questions.

I often ask our middle and high schoolers, where do you see yourself in the parable. Are you centered in Christ, so that nothing can uproot you? Is your identity grounded in God's limitless grace, and are you willing to extend that grace to others? Can anyone tell whether you are wheat or weeds by the way you live your life? Do you let God be the judge of who belongs in God's kingdom?

Like those workers in the field, we may think it's our job to pull the weeds, to judge who is worthy to flourish in God's kingdom and who should be kicked out. But that is not our job. Judgment is God's job. God will take care of removing evil in God's own good time.

In the meantime, we live in the "already-not yet." The kingdom is becoming...and we are part of that kingdom. The kingdom comes with limitless grace in the midst of an evil world. Our job is to offer that grace – to offer Christ – with the same kind of abundant generosity God has offered to us. I invite you to go one step further with me.

When we aren't judging others for the bad things they do, what does that look like? I believe it looks like love and compassion. But how can you love someone like Hitler, or love someone who must be made of pure evil, I'm sure some examples of people are popping into your head. I invite you to pray for them. Give them God's grace through prayer, lift them up to God and allow God to continue his work.

When you let go of that judgment against people, you are letting go of hatred in your heart. So while you pray for those who wrong you or do hateful crimes toward people because of the color of their skin, your heart is beginning to fill with love and compassion. And you'll notice that those bad things we blame God for in our lives start to look like opportunity for change.

The bad begins to look like hope.

Last week I began catching up on one of my favorite summer TV shows, America's Got Talent. A choir based from San Diego, CA came to audition. The director shared that she started "Voices of Our City Choir" four years ago for those experiencing homelessness in her neighborhood. She met unsheltered musicians and singers and invited them to start a band which turned into a choir. The group began to help meet the needs of those within the group: paying for rent, helping afford medications, and helping people get off the streets. In song writing workshops they wrote the song used as their audition that I am about to show you. But what I want you to witness is how the arts play a role in the tragedy they experience 24/7 living on the streets without a home or the security of food. Goodness and mercy disguised as the arts gave them a new lease on life. Hear the words of these artists as they prepared for their audition:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvSRZNtnMQk>

Take a moment to examine your own heart right now. Who have you already decided is a 'weed' to be excluded from Kingdom of God? Who have you nurtured so that their roots in faith are strong? Who has nurtured your own faith, and helped you to grow in Christ? How can your life – this week – show others that God's kingdom is alive in you?