

Turn Away From The Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 24, 2011

I.

Our yard has been green all summer even though we had very little rain until recently. But if you had looked closely you would have seen it was green not because of grass, but because of weeds. It looks OK if we keep it cut short. But that is temporary. A day of reckoning will come.

I wonder if today's Gospel could apply to our yard. When Susan tells me to pull up some weeds, perhaps I could say it would be contrary to the Bible. After all, we just heard Jesus say to let the weeds grow. He said God will send his angels to take care of them later.

Would that get me out of working in the yard? Probably not. I should do something about the weeds. When we have our fall clean-up later this year, I hope we pull up every weed we find. And I'm glad Gwen and Paul have little tolerance for weeds as they care for the church grounds.

But while weeds in our yard are real, weeds in today's reading are symbolic as we continue with Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven. Last week we heard about different types of soil into which the same seeds were sown. This week it is reversed as we hear about different kinds of seeds growing in the same soil.

II.

And at this point, I should reiterate two things about the "kingdom of heaven." First, as we know, the kingdom is not defined in terms of geography, but rather the spiritual authority and grace of God when he eventually reigns over all humanity and banishes evil forever. We refer to it in the Lord's Prayer when we say, "Thy kingdom come."

Second, while the final reality of God's kingdom is in the future, it already is partially here. The kingdom became real when Christ was born as the revelation of God on earth. And it is getting closer every day, but it is not yet completely here. The promises of the kingdom are on their way, but the problems of the world are with us for a while longer. We still have to wait.

And that waiting period might be illustrated by the story of Father John, an old Episcopal priest who sometimes found he could talk to God in prayer and receive immediate real-time responses.

On one of these occasions God said, "You know Father John, my Son Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as seeds scattered on the ground, and weeds growing among the wheat." Then God continued, "You should know some other things about heaven. For example, a million dollars on earth is but a penny here in heaven. And a thousand years on earth is but a minute here."

Father John thought, "Really? A million dollars here is only a penny there." So he said, "Well, God, in that case, could you spare a million dollars?" God responded, "Sure, give me a minute."

The point here is God's time is not our time, and God's values are not our values. The parable in the Gospel is an example. It shows the contrast between God's good purposes and Satan's evil purposes, and offers heavenly guidance as we wait for God to prevail when God is ready.

III.

The parable itself, which Jesus told to the crowds, described a rural setting where a farmer's enemy secretly planted weeds in his wheat, and the farmer decided to let the weeds grow with the wheat because he couldn't pull up one without damaging the other. The farmer said he would separate the two at the harvest.

That's a fairly simple story. Farmers often have problems with weeds in their crops. Nothing new there. The only thing that might get our attention is the fact that some bad guy sneaked into the field and intentionally planted some weeds.

But Jesus' private explanation to the disciples presented a far different picture. He said the wheat represents those who are faithful and obedient to him, and weeds are the evil people of the world who serve the devil. And at the end of the age angels will come to cast those who are evil into the fiery furnace while the those who are faithful will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Wow! In an instant we're transported from agriculture to the apocalypse; from a quiet farm to the fiery furnace. The wheat ends up in heaven. Weeds are gathered and sent to hell.

And this explanation contains strong language that might make us uncomfortable. We might want to hear about grace, not judgment. We might want to be told of God's love, not his demands. We might prefer the joy of the salvation instead of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But the Gospels are what they are. They depict not only love and joy, but also evil and sin. The world was created perfect, just as the wheat was planted without weeds. But Satan introduced sin just as weeds invaded the wheat. God's wheat and Satan's weeds exist together, and now we live in a broken world where bad things can happen to good people. The harvest is not yet here.

And we might ask why God doesn't control and micromanage every possible situation so that things always come out right. But then we would not have free will, and for now, at least, people still make bad choices. It will be different in the kingdom.

IV.

So, what does all this mean for us? I would suggest two things. First, we are to know that evil and good coexist in the world, and we accept that reality knowing we cannot always control when or how they appear. God's harvest eventually will take care of evil.

Second, however, evil does not get a free pass until that time. We still must resist evil; especially when evil people do evil things that hurt good people. This includes crime, terrorism, social injustice, and other atrocities that diminish our society. God wants to help us make the world a better place and leave something good behind for those who follow.

But, this is easier said than done, isn't it? How do we deal with Satan and his weeds? How do we answer our call in the middle of this epic and monumental conflict between good and evil; this struggle between how God wants to bless us and Satan wants to curse us?

An African proverb says that when elephants fight, grass gets trampled. Well, those two ancient elephants have been fighting for ages, and we want to avoid being the grass, don't we?

Let's start with some basics. It's important to know that Satan is a real spiritual being, not just a metaphor or idea that symbolizes human weakness. Scripture tells us these things. Satan exists. Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, and throughout Scripture Jesus referred to Satan, or the devil, or the evil one, as a spiritual reality, not just a concept.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus said he saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning (10:18). And war in heaven and the expulsion of Satan and his angels is graphically described in the Book of Revelation (12:7-9). St. Peter said that the devil prowls like a lion, looking for people to devour (1 Pe. 5:8). St. Paul warned that Satan always is scheming to outwit us (2 Cor. 2:11).

The Book of Ephesians summarizes these truths. It says that our struggle ultimately is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (6:12).

And in this context the term "heavenly realms" does not refer to the eternal dwelling place of God, but rather what we see when we look into the sky at night. Earth is part of that. The world, as part of the heavenly realms, is where Satan does his work.

So when Jesus spoke of the devil in today's reading, he was referring to actual evil in the world that is being done by actual spiritual forces committed to deter God from carrying out his purposes for us. And I hope we understand that this spiritual world is no less real merely because we are unable to see it.

This can raise the question of what is happening in this unseen world around us. I don't want to freak anybody out, but if what I said about Satan and his agents and the spiritual realms is true, then it follows there are beings right here in the world, right here in this building, that we cannot see. And Scripture tells us they are both good and bad.

I already mentioned how those forces of evil have their domain on earth and within creation. But we also know that God sent his ministering angels to help us as well. Those of you who heard Bishop Gray speak at our training session at St. Pierre's last month will remember he said there were angels right there at the altar.

And in Hebrews we are told that angels are spirits in the divine service, sent to serve those who inherit salvation (1:14). The Psalms proclaim that the Lord will command his angels to guard us in all our ways (91:11), and that angels are with those who fear the Lord, and will deliver them (34:7).

Now, does each of us have our own guardian angel? Scripture is not specific. There probably are times when we all have experienced divine intervention. And I personally believe that our prayers, faith, and good works can have positive effects on these angelic spiritual presences around us. In the same way, the absence of them can encourage the other side.

The bottom line is that Jesus made clear in today's Gospel that Satan is among us, and we know he is not working alone. We also know that angels of the Lord also are here to help us. There are many references in Scripture to each, and if they were here two thousand years ago there is no reason to believe they are not here now.

V.

So, you came here this morning to pray, worship, celebrate the Eucharist, be uplifted, and think about holy things. And you heard a sermon about how good and evil exist together, and a discussion of angels and demons, and spiritual warfare.

Take heart. Let me end with some words of hope. Don't worry a lot about these evil powers. They are too strong to defeat with just our own strength and abilities. But Jesus can be our strength if we turn to him. And prayer and worship can frustrate evil and build up what is good.

So the question is not how close we are to evil and darkness, but how close we are to God and light. By opening the door to Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit we close the door on things not from God. And if we do that, then we don't have to worry about where all these weeds came from, or what they're doing here. And perhaps I can ignore those weeds in my yard. *Amen.*