

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost A 23 July 2023

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

*“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.” Let’s pray: ...*

Of all the parables Jesus tells, this one irritates me the most. My sense of justice wants the weeds eradicated - the miscreants thrown out, and the world freed of scumbags. But that’s not how the story goes. The Master of the harvest forbids such action. So, what’s going on here? We need to look at the weeds first, then the landowner’s words.

The weeds that’ve grown up in the wheat field are [ζιζάνια – zizanium] or darnel; a plant which resembles wheat in many ways but is worthless. The difference between wheat and darnel is nearly impossible to detect in the early stages of growth. As the plants mature, the roots become intertwined and are almost inseparable. Unless the weeds are removed, the flour made from the wheat will be spoiled by bitterness and mild toxicity. The solution is to harvest the plants, spread them on a flat surface, and then remove the weeds, which by this stage are a different colour to the wheat.

Jesus says that the weeds can be separated from the wheat only at the proper time, following the harvest - “Let both of them grow together until the harvest.” This makes sense to us in the context of farming, but what about the obvious allusion to good and bad in the world, and how do we cope with our expectation that God will sort everything out?

From a sinful human perspective, the weeds that we want to yank out by the roots are, you know, the people we’d like to offer some concrete counselling; the people we want punished for their wrongdoing; the people we want locked up and the key thrown away; maybe even at times, the people we think don’t deserve to live.

We want the wheat field, goodness in the world, to flourish with wheat, and not spoiled by weeds. And when we don't see this happening, we turn our despair into a complaint about God. Why doesn't God stop people from doing bad things? Why doesn't God stop them from committing horrible crimes? Why didn't God stop that moron from throwing a brick through our vestry window?

Jesus doesn't deny that there're weeds in the wheat. He doesn't suggest that the world is free from evil. The weeds are there, plain for everyone to see. Jesus knows what's up — "An enemy has done this!" What's meant to produce a sumptuous harvest of wheat, is spoiled by clumps of weeds - the world is a terribly broken place.

It's understandable, therefore, that we might be perplexed to hear Jesus say, "Let both of them grow together until the harvest." Yet, in this declaration lies a clue which brings us to our second point – the landowner's [Jesus'] words; one in particular.

**"Let both of them grow together until the harvest."** The original Greek word [ἄφετε – *aphete* from ἀφίημι - *aphiēmi* "Let"] has a wide range of meanings. It variously means allow, permit, or leave alone. More significantly, in the context of this parable it means "pardon" or "forgive." It's the same usage that appears in the 5<sup>th</sup> petition of the Lord's Prayer in [Matthew 6:12], "*Forgive* us our sins as we *forgive* those who sin against us."

In the original language, "Let both of them grow together until the harvest" carries a sense of forgiveness toward malicious enemies; harnessing Jesus' command to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44,45).

Far from our expectations, Jesus invites us to costly discipleship. The very real evil that others do is not to be answered by pulling out the weeds, by attacking and destroying the people responsible. Doing so only escalates harm in the world. We are not children of Satan; and as God's children, we are called to live lives of forgiveness, and be willing to trust in God's purposes for his world, without counting the cost.

In this parable, we see God the landowner, role-modelling to us kingdom patience and forgiveness. God commands us to be like this in the world, that through our witness of patience and forgiveness over and against those who'd rather be intolerant and merciless, God may be known and glorified.

As Pastor Stephen told us last Sunday, sometimes we're all four of the growing conditions that the seed of the gospel is planted into. Likewise, sometimes we're wheat and sometimes we're weeds. God gives us amazing latitude to make choices, to do right, even to do wrong to the point of inflicting grievous harm on others and on ourselves. Yet, he doesn't pull people out of their mess by condemning them; rather, by forgiving them. It does seem to be a strange way to run the world; even scandalous. I want the Lord to hurl thunderbolts at our enemies, but God clearly doesn't work that way.

The most convincing evidence is the story of Jesus himself. Think about what he teaches. Thankfully, Jesus doesn't suggest that we should be paid back in kind for the evil we've done in our lives. Instead, he goes around telling strange and scandalous parables about patience and forgiveness. What were his words for his enemies when they nailed him to a cross? - "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Risen from the dead, he forgives the disciples who skipped out on him during his hour of need, and sends them out to spread his forgiveness, his patience, his mercy, his love.

Once the harvest is in, the weeds will be recognised for what they are and God will sort them out on Judgement Day. There's mercy, but there's also justice. We are loved by a God who welcomes us with open arms, and sadly, there'll always be those who reject the comfort of his grace and mercy.

Saints, this parable teaches us that there's something far greater than our sense of justice. There's divine forgiveness, the willingness to let weeds and wheat grow together for a season because they are somehow inseparable; recognition that revenge resolves nothing, but only increases evil. Whether we're always capable of living in the light of that truth or not, it's clear from this parable, and clearer still from the cross, that forgiveness and patience are God's way of working with a broken world. This might make us feel uncomfortable, even at odds with God, but without his forbearance, his forgiveness, his love, none of us would stand a chance.

Saints, let's not be coaxed away from the wondrous conclusion of this parable: how, despite Satan's utmost attempts to undermine God's work, the harvest happens, and an abundance of wheat is gathered in, enough to make the landowner and his farm hands rejoice together. The weeds in the field are powerless to stop this bounty from growing to full maturity. The seed of God's word endures through all adversity, and yields a fruitful harvest of glorious triumph: "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matthew 13:43).

Evil is real, but it's not ultimate. Evil never has the last word. Greater by far are you who shine in our Father's kingdom, you who mirror the bright light of divine compassion. Such was one person who, amid the horrors of the Ravensbruck\* death camp, found faith and hope enough to write a prayer. A prayer that points us beyond the enemy's evil actions to the breathtaking wonder of the harvest. It affirms that God's patience and forgiveness is wisdom, not foolishness. Let's now dare to pray this prayer together:

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering — our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this, and when they come to judgement, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness. Amen."

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus, the Lord of the harvest. Amen.

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\*The RAVENSBRUCK Prayer, was found at Ravensbruck death camp where 92,000 women and children died. It was scrawled on wrapping paper near a dead child.

<https://www.cnumc.org/committee-post/prayers-for-peace-for-international-day-of-peace-september-21-15431156> - accessed 13/07/2023.

Also printed in [2000 Years of Prayer, compiled by Michael Counsell, Morehouse Publishing, 1999, page 469].

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