

Weeds and Wheat: Judging One Another

Sunday, July 23, 2023

I

I think this is a hard Gospel passage to hear and to think about. And to preach about, by the way! 'Cause the basic sense of it — the issue that lies at the base of it — is the issue of judgment.

Rob Bell, a well-known Christian author, wrote a book a number of years ago called *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of every Person Who Ever Lived*. Which is a pretty comprehensive title, if you ask me. But it was a great book!

And on the first page, he tells the following story: He says that several years ago his church had an art show where they invited artists to display their paintings, poems and such, in order to reflect their understanding of being a peacemaker. And one artist included in her work a quote from Gandhi which, apparently, a number of folks found quite compelling.

But not quite everyone. No, apparently someone attached a piece of paper to that piece of art that read “Reality check: Gandhi’s in hell!” Bell writes “Really? Gandhi’s in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know?”

Hmm. How we judge, don’t we? I mean, I had an opinion about Bin Laden ... didn’t you? I mean, after 9/11 and all. And see, somehow, I think all this judging of one another fits right into our passage from Matthew this morning, this little story Jesus telling about the wheat and weeds. Basically — our human judgment against one another. And God’s judgment of us all in the end. So let’s try to make sense of what’s going on here.

II

See, the setting for this little story of wheat and weeds is that it’s part of a string of stories that Jesus tells, trying to convey the sense of God’s Kingdom. Near this passage, we hear about God’s grace falling like seeds on the earth ... some take, some don’t. But you never know. You never know what’s taken root till the end.

So I think Jesus’ point here is that God waits. God will wait, giving us humans every chance in the world to become what He’s called us to be — fully human, reflecting His image — as fully human as we frail humans can possibly become over the course of our lifetimes. So the Kingdom of God is like seeds sown that take deep root — like a net thrown into the sea,

catching fish of every kind – all to be sorted out at the end of it all. But now let's look a bit closer at today's passage.

The workers ask the Master, "Didn't you sow good seed?" The Master responds, "Yes, but an enemy came in the night and planted weeds." "Well, do you want us to rip the weeds out now?" "No. 'Cause if you do, you're bound to pull up the good wheat along with the weeds. So just be patient. And when it's time for the harvest to be reaped, then we'll just pile up all the bad stuff, haul it off, and burn it."

Well, that's pretty much this morning's simple little story that Jesus told. And of course, there are no real surprises in the way it starts out: Weeds springing up among the precious wheat that was planted. I mean, everyone knows that weeds are gonna grow. You find 'em pushing up through the pavement on our streets and sidewalks; you find them breaking out among your roses; in the middle of your driveway. Weeds, weeds, everywhere!

So there's gonna be weeds in life. That's just a fact! But of course Jesus wasn't talking about actual weeds, was He? No, He was talking metaphorically here. He's talking about weeds that spring up in the government, weeds sprouting up in corporate America, weeds shooting up in the church, weeds in the family, weeds in the parish — you know, those folks who don't take part, don't come, don't give, don't share ... I mean, just weeds!

Now if you go back to Jesus' story, Jesus says these weeds cluttering up our garden are the work of the enemy — that enemy who steals in during the dark of night, polluting our fields with bad seed. Sown by our enemy who's out to ruin all the good we cherish, out to ruin my country, ruin my church ... that enemy who's against all that's good and beautiful in MY world!

And so your perfectly normal reaction to the sight of weeds in your garden is, "Yank 'em up! Toss 'em out! Put 'em on a boat and send 'em back where they came from! They want to wear their funny clothes? Then let them get the heck out of here and go home!"

And what about those weeds in our Parish? I mean, what about those who just never come to church, though their names are still on the rolls? What about those who never give, never show their face? Those you haven't seen in years. Wipe 'em off the rolls too? Get rid of the chaff? The driftwood? The deadwood?

I mean, the impulse to weed the garden — to clean up your world to your own liking — is just so natural. But getting back to Jesus' point here, the problem is that when the workers ask the Master whether they should clean up his field by pulling up the weeds, he says, "No. Leave the weeds alone. Don't weed during the growing season. Let 'em all grow til the harvest. Then we'll sort it all out. But just leave the weeds alone till then."

Well, what in the world kind of answer is that? Just leave the weeds in there, polluting the wheat? Wheat and weeds in the same bed together? I mean, don't you have to draw a line? Hold the line? Take a stand against the weeds? What about right and wrong? What about making decisions about where things stand: You stay, you go! Root out the weeds once and for all!

But see, there are some real problems raised here by our little Bible story. And here's one: Who decides who's a weed and who's not? Some would have said Trump was a weed! Others delighted in his scamperings and daily surprises! And of course, sometimes there's real destruction in weeding. Remember Joe McCarthy who was gonna pull up all the "pinko" communist weeds infecting our country? And in the process — if I remember my history — he wound up destroying many innocent people's lives.

And of course, more chillingly Timothy McVeigh had a few weeds he wanted to take care of ... and so does the Ku Klux Klan. But in our story this morning, the Master says, "Leave the weeds alone. 'Cause if you try to pull them out from the wheat, you'll just kill 'em both. 'Cause you run the risk of doing more harm than good."

But why is that? Why? I think the answer to that question takes the problem to a whole new level.

III

Someone once said, "It is absurd to divide folks into good and bad. People are either charming ... or they're tedious." Well, I don't think Jesus is saying exactly that! But I do think He seems to be saying here that the reason you should not try to pull up the weeds is that most of the time — and I'm not talking Hitler here — it's very, very hard to tell the weeds from the wheat. And so when you think you're saving the wheat, you might wind up with just a crop of weeds in the end ... risking in the process turning your very self into the evil you target.

See, it's very hard to know which is which ... weeds or wheat. Please stay with me here. In fact, in the end you really do not know. You and I just do not finally know. God only knows. And so God says, "At harvest time, I'll take care of all that. I'll know the weeds from the wheat. So you just leave it alone and leave it to me."

Now. I do not want to be misunderstood here. Do not misunderstand me, please! I am not saying that all of life is morally ambiguous ... that there is no actual right or wrong. I am not saying you shouldn't take up a baseball bat to save a child being beaten and raped. I am not saying that our country should stand idle while Ukraine is run over by a tyrant who mows down innocent civilians in the streets. I am not saying we should let that go with a mere slap on the wrist, turning a blind eye. Of course not!

And if you look at the whole Gospel, I do not read Jesus saying that either. No, a measured response that protects innocent lives, for the purpose of justice, and not mere retribution, is fitting and right. It's just that the devil's so often in the details. Yes, the devil's in the details.

I think one major point of Jesus' story here is this: Beware of sinners judging other sinners — especially with finality, last word, case closed! Ghandi's in hell, right? Yeah. 'Cause good and evil do exist side by side — not only in the world, but in your heart and mine as well.

So please do not be fooled. This story of Jesus warns you and me that we will never completely eradicate the weeds, we will never eradicate weediness from the world. Because I believe only God can finally heal the evil embedded deep down in creation.

So this is the point: I think here, basically, the Lord cautions against judgmentalism — the rush to judgment — yanking the weeds from the wheat: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ... Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye ... but do not notice the log in your own?”

No. If there's any final judging to be done, God — our merciful Judge — will do it. And Jesus does make very clear that at some unforeseeable time in the future, God will bring down the final curtain on history. And so there will come a day on which all our days — and all the judgments upon us — and all our judgments upon each other — will themselves be judged.

But in the meantime our patient Master waits, giving plenty of time and every good chance to all of us weeds to be changed into something better.

Finally, there's this hope: God sees you and me with terrible clarity. And God sees you and me whole. God meets and redeems you in all the ways you have it together ... and in all the ways you don't. God redeems you in all the times you display for the world your goodness ... and in all the times you fall flat on your moral face.

So in that final harvest, the just One who judges you fully will be the merciful One who loves you fully: that patient Master, who waits.

Amen.