

Pentecost 5 2011 [PR 11]  
Matt. 13: 24-30, 36-43

This parable takes over where last Sunday's parable ended, namely with the "good soil". Again we see God as the sower. But God is not the only sower. Satan sows seeds as well. Dr. Fredrick Dale Bruner in his commentary on Matthew says, "If the enemy cannot keep the seed from striking root, which is his first goal in history... then... Satan works next to distract workers from their preoccupation with the Word by overwhelming them with a loathing of evil. If the enemy cannot strike the root he will smash the fruit; if he cannot hinder faith he can corrupt love." (Bruner, Matthew Commentary, p. 497).

The work of Satan is to keep us blaming one another or blaming God for the evil we see in the world rather than on placing the blame for evil where it belongs, on the doorstep of Satan. If we are busy blaming God or other people for the trouble in the world, we lose our capacity to love God and our neighbor.

Anyone who has lived in this world very long has learned that we live in a broken world, that we are broken people, and that all human institutions are broken as well. All human communities and institutions, including the church, exhibit the influence of God and of Satan. Good and evil struggle together and the battleground is the human heart, the human community and all human institutions. Jesus said that the enemy, Satan, is the one who sows weeds among the wheat. It is the evil one who is the cause of trouble in the world. There will always be trouble in this world. We will not overcome it by our own valiant efforts to improve things via education, politics, economics, peace or justice. That doesn't mean we stop trying to improve

things but we must realize that we cannot perfect the world. The weeds have been sown into our world by the enemy of God.

We live in-between the sowing and the harvest. And it's a gray world. One of the most discouraging lessons I have had to learn in my life is that the church, as a human institution, is not perfect. Now, you may say, "Poor Pastor, he's so naïve. Everyone knows the church isn't perfect." On a cognitive level I know that to be true. But on an emotional level you & I want the church to be a sacred place, a place where good people do good things. I want the church to be a safe refuge from the storms of life. I want the church to be about the business of truth, and above all to be faithful in pointing to Jesus. And thanks be to God, the church can and is that in many ways.

But we also need to be aware that the church, because it is a human institution, is broken. And even more sinister forces are at work than just the natural forces of atrophy that pull us down into failure and disappointment. Jesus says in the parable that the evil one sows weeds in the church that disrupt the church. There's an old saying that goes:

["Wherever God erects a House of Prayer – The Devil builds a chapel there.  
And 'twill be found upon investigation – The latter has the larger congregation."](#)

(Quoted by Bruner p. 498)

That sounds like a very cynical attitude but would it surprise you to know that according to Jesus' parable, ["the major work of the evil one is not, as often thought, outside the church, but in the midst of her."](#) (Bruner p. 497). The evil one doesn't need to work very hard on the people who have no faith.

He already has them. No, the evil one works the hardest to utterly destroy, disrupt, disillusion & discourage the faith of those who hear the word of God and who believe. It is the work of the Evil One to snatch the word of God out of your life, like the birds snatch the seed from the path. So it should not surprise us that, even in the church, you will find the work of the Evil One. Now that's a chilling thought but that's exactly what Jesus is telling us in this parable. How then should we respond?

Note how Jesus tells the story. “The servants of the master came up and said to him, “Lord, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Then where did all these weeds come from?” And he said to them, “An enemy did this.” So the servants said to him, “Then do you want us to go and pull them out? And he said, “Oh no, lest in pulling out the weeds you uproot the wheat as well! Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will say to the reapers, “Pull out the weeds first and tie them up in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn.”

We are not competent to make judgments between the weeds and the wheat. We are not called to judge...we are good at it but it is not our job. The parable of the weeds in the wheat is a parable of patience. We learn from this parable that God is patient. The servants in the parable are impatient and nervous. They want to “pull up the weeds” and “root ‘em out”. But God is patient and restrained, waiting for the harvest to reveal the good and punish evil.

Hear again Dr. Bruner, “The witch hunts and Inquisitions that besmirch the pages of church history make excellent examples of the wisdom of Jesus’

Parable of the Weeds and its lesson not to concentrate our ministries on the elimination of evil.” (Bruner p. 500).

Theologian W.D. Davies in his book “The Sermon on the Mount” says, “The Parable of the Weeds argues against fanaticism in the exercise of church discipline. A too-great zeal to rid the church of impurities—a certain Puritanism—is against Jesus’ will and seriously hurts believers (v 29). The decisive separation of pure and impure Christians must wait for the unerring Judgment of God (v 30).” (Quoted by Bruner p. 501). But if a Puritanical witch hunt and inquisition is a ditch on one side of the road, the ditch on the other side of the road is a libertinism that leads to an unholy laxity in the church where anything goes and tolerance replaces clear thinking. We cannot eliminate evil from any human institution, including the church, any more than we can eliminate evil from our own lives. This parable teaches us where evil comes from and who is behind it. That’s the first lesson.

But there’s a second lesson here also. The parable is also a great comfort to believers who struggle with sin, both within themselves and in all human institutions, including the church. The lesson is that evil is temporary and in the end will be purged by the holy judgment of God. The poem by James Russell Lowell gives us great comfort as we live in this “in-between” time. His poem is titled, “Once to Every Man and Nation”, the last verse says:

“Though the cause of evil prosper, yet ‘tis truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold, And upon the throne be wrong,  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, And, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above his own.”

(Once to Every Man and Nation, SBH #547)

The good news is that evil is temporary and that the good endures and will stand in the judgment of God on the last day.

You can be confident that the victory of God's kingdom is a sure thing. You can count on it. The harvest will come. The children of God will find their reward waiting for them. This is God's doing, not ours. This parable is not an exhortation to hard work to bring in the harvest. The promise of the harvest is not about our individual success nor about the church's success/unity & love, but rather about the faithfulness of God who sent Jesus to forgive the sins of the world in order to gather you into His harvest in the fullness of time. Thanks be to God. Amen