

This week we're pondering the second in a series of parables found in chapter 13 of Matthew, the chapter which happens to be the middle of the gospel of Matthew and the third distinct section of this gospel. Over the past month or so we've seen the beginning of Jesus' ministry and sending out of the disciples; we've seen John, from jail, send his disciples to Jesus seeking reassurance; we've seen the crowds divided between those who believe Jesus to be a prophet and those who think he's just another troublemaker. It seems a pertinent time for Jesus to talk about who he is and what he has to do with the kingdom of heaven.

Last week the parable of the sower gave us four examples of ground that seed might be sown on, and what the results would be. This week we have a sower who sowed good seed in a field, but an enemy came in the middle of the night and sowed bad seed in amongst the good seed. Of course, no one realized this until it was too late, until both the weeds and wheat began growing together and had actually sprouted grain. Then it was evident that something had happened.

The servants seem to be kind of appalled. "Didn't you sow good seed?" they ask. "Then why are there weeds among your wheat?"

The sower explains: an enemy has come and sown bad seed among the good. How he knows this isn't clear; he doesn't assume that the bad seed was blown into the field by the wind, or came in some other random manner, but that an enemy was responsible.

The servants want to fix the problem immediately by going and pulling up the weeds. If you have a garden you know that this is standard practice, keeping gardens free from weeds.

In this case, however, the roots of the weeds become entangled with the roots of the wheat. The weed in question is an actual plant called the dandelion, a wheat look-alike that was a menace to wheat farmers at that time (and may still be, I don't know enough about wheat farming to say.) The dandelion was bad in several ways: for one, it was dangerous to eat and could cause hallucinations and death. For another thing, as I already mentioned, its roots would become entangled with the wheat roots, so that it stole water and nutrients from the wheat.

So the servants offered to go and pull up the dandelion, but the farmer knew that pulling up the dandelion with its roots entwined with the roots of the wheat would result in the loss of the wheat as well. The whole crop would be ruined. So he counsels the servants to leave things alone until harvest time, when the dandelion could be pulled up safely and separated from the wheat. The dandelion would be burned and the wheat gathered into the barn. The crop would be saved.

What are we to make of this story, this parable? Last week the focus was on the different types of ground that seeds might fall on, and how well the seed would take root. The seed was the word of God and the ground represented anyone who would hear the word of God and how they would receive it. It seemed to be an explanation of why some hear and believe and bear fruit because of the hearing, while others don't.

Today's passage is about the kingdom of God. In fact, the passage begins with Jesus saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." We might ask *how is the kingdom of heaven like a field of weeds and wheat?* The disciples asked this, asked Jesus to explain the parable. We ask it as well, especially those of us who aren't farmers I think. The commentary at the end gives us some idea: the sower is the Son of Man, who we know of as Jesus; the field is the world and the wheat seeds are children of the kingdom while the dandelion seeds are children of the evil one. The world, therefore, is filled with good and bad, righteous and unrighteous children; but it isn't always easy to tell who's who in this equation. And sometimes it might be that each one of us is both wheat and weed, depending on where we are in our lives.

On the one hand the commentary by Jesus seems to be telling us that God will take care of things in the end, that it isn't our job to sort out the weeds from the wheat in our churches and our communities and the world. I personally find this comforting, knowing that it isn't ultimately my responsibility to know or decide who is bound for the barn and who is bound for the fire. Theologically speaking, this is above my pay grade.

Leaving the farming analogy behind for a minute, we know that good and bad are part of our world—including the people who inhabit that world. Though I have a hard time saying that anyone is *bad* but there are folks do bad things, who seem to be always destructive or self-destructive and who end up hurting the people around them. Even the apostle Paul angsts about knowing what is good and right and wanting to do those things but sometimes just being unable to follow through. I'm that way; you might not know this about me but I have bad or evil thoughts sometimes; I'm jealous and envious and greedy and broken and a whole lot of other adjectives that I'd rather not get into, well, *ever*. Does that make me a darnel? I hope not but there isn't really any reason that I would not be considered a weed. Except perhaps that I am a child of God, that perhaps, *perhaps* the spirit of God rests on me, as we hear Paul say. Perhaps I am adopted into God's family, and heir along with Jesus of God's promises.

There's a catch, though (isn't there always?) that in order to inherit along with Christ I must also suffer along with Christ. And there is much suffering to be had in our present age—even with advances in medicine we still face outrageous rates of diabetes, cancer, drug addiction, heart disease and other illnesses. Even with advances in communication we still face misunderstandings that lead to war, even in an time when the stock market is higher than it's ever been in this country we still have people living in poverty; even with social media and internet we still have people who live lonely lives. Even with advances in understanding between the races we still have fear keeping us apart, keeping us uncomfortable with each other, separate from each other. Everyone suffers, it is the great equalizer.

Many people ask, why doesn't God just end all suffering? Why not eliminate the evil that causes us to suffer? It is the great question, isn't it—if God is all good and all powerful, then why not just make everything alright? Perhaps this is where we come back to the wheat and the weeds—all too often weeds and wheat, good and evil are so closely entangled that to root out one is to kill the other. And so we have to endure, as Paul encourages us to do, because at the end of the age all will be made clear and right. Creation will be restored and humanity along with it. Wheat—God's good children—will receive the glory of God's new kingdom in heaven and on earth. Weeds will not.

This isn't some "pie in the sky, by and by" hope but a hope that is ours because we have received the Spirit of God through our faith in Jesus Christ. We may not be able to see exactly what the kingdom of God will look like but we can imagine. Traditional images are of streets of gold; I think it will be even better. I think it will mean an end to all suffering, all unhappiness, all addiction, all injustice, all loneliness, all of the things that keep us from full humanity as envisioned by God when God created the earth and everything in it, including humans, and called it good.

This is both good news but hard to hear, I think. No one wants to suffer or see their loved ones suffer. No one wants to think that suffering is necessary; and I don't think that's what Paul is saying here (or what the weeds and wheat parable means either, for that matter.) But we must not let our suffering overcome our faith in God, our faith in the promise of Jesus Christ, our faith in the leading of the Spirit.

In our world today we are fed a steady diet of fear—have you noticed that? Fear is used to control us, to keep us under the thumb of those in power; fear is used to keep us tied to the flesh—that is, focusing on ourselves rather than on God. Fear is also used to keep us from doing the right thing, or

focusing on the right thing. We focus on money, youth, wealth, health, work; we are convinced that the loss of any of those things would lead to unendurable suffering and that suffering is bad. We are fed a diet of fear that takes us away from focusing on God and God's agenda for our lives and the world. An agenda of loving God with our heart, mind, soul and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. An agenda that will ultimately lead to such glory that we cannot even imagine.

God has good things in store for us. As children of God, as people of the Spirit, we need not be afraid of anything for the Spirit offers us hope. We need not worry about whether we're wheat or weeds or both together; or whether the person beside us is either, for in the Spirit of God in Christ we believe that what we get is not what we now see and experience, but will be more glorious than we can ever imagine. Amen.