

JULY 19, 2020 7TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST YEAR A

The Good Seed and the Tares

It seems to me there is a whole lot that falls short in the metaphor Jesus offers now. One cannot miss the harsh judgment with which Jesus punctuates on this section of his preaching. And yet, this stark way of thinking is familiar to us. We hear it, we live it all the time.

It could be that Jesus means this as a simple word of warning that you and I are not to be ‘bad seed’ — as though we can begin to control that anyway. This could be, and yet, I find myself standing with the householder today, wondering what to do with the whole mess of “wheat and weeds” before me. For if we stand with the householder, it seems to me, then Jesus’ words are to:

“Wait. It is not harvest time yet. Let them grow. Let them grow together. One will not be tainted by the other. And at the time of the harvest it will all be sorted out.” Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt says maybe this is a reminder that you and I are not to judge. Perhaps the word for us is that we simply do not have the ability to discern the good from the bad — at least not in one another. And maybe this is also so. Maybe the metaphor simply does not work when it comes to people. For how can one be good from the start and another evil? Maybe even Jesus was scrambling for a way to make a point as you and I so often do. Indeed, could it be that this one simply doesn’t work.

‘I cannot say for sure, but this I know’ Rev. Hunt says: ‘The world often does not work that way, of course. And it may be so that in the end God will not show mercy either. But either way, here and now, you and I are meant to grow alongside the ‘weeds’, those who appear to be less than, different from, yes, other than what we believe God intends. The weeds can’t hurt us. More than that, taking them away too soon may even harm us.’

W.M. Thomson in the 'The Land and the Book' tells how he saw the tares in the Wadi Hamam: 'The grain is just in the proper stage of development to illustrate the parable. In those parts where the grain has headed out, produced seed heads, the tare have done the same, and there a child cannot mistake them for wheat or barley; but when both are less developed, the closest scrutiny will often detect them. I cannot do it at all with any confidence. Even the farmers, who in this country generally weed their fields, do not attempt to separate the one from the other. They would not only mistake good grain for them, but very commonly the roots of the two are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them without plucking up both. Both, therefore, must be left to grow together until the time of harvest.'

The tares and the wheat are so like each other that the Jews called the tares 'bastard' wheat. A very popular story is that the tares took their origin in the time of wickedness which preceded the flood, for at that time the whole creation, human beings, animals and plants, all went astray, and committed fornication and brought forth contrary to nature. In their early stages, the wheat and the tares so closely resembled each other that the popular idea was that the tares were a kind of wheat which had gone wrong.

The wheat and tares could not be safely separated when both were growing, but in the end, they had to be separated, because the grain of the bearded darnel is slightly poisonous. It causes dizziness and sickness and is narcotic in its effects, and even a small amount has a bitter and unpleasant taste. In the end, it was usually separated by hand. The scholar N. Levison describes the process: 'Women have to be hired to pick the darnel grain out of the seed which is to be milled. As a rule, the separation of the darnel from the wheat is done after the threshing. By spreading the grain out on a large tray which is set before the women, they are able to pick out the darnel, which is a seed similar in shape and size to wheat, but slate-grey in color.'

William Barclay writes in *The Gospel of Matthew*: ‘The picture of a man deliberately sowing darnel in someone else’s field is by no means only imagination. That was actually sometimes done. To this day in India, one of the direst threats which someone can make to an enemy is: ‘I will sow bad seed in your field.’ And in codified Roman law, this crime is forbidden, and its punishment laid down.’

There are bad seeds that grow in the soil, but there are also some people that called another person a ‘bad seed.’ No one is born with a bad seed, we are all born good, but somewhere in life a bad seed develops and grows into something evil unless while still in early stages the bad seed can be turned into a healthy good seed with the teaching of Jesus. Isn’t ‘bad seed’ or ‘tare’ a vitally important word for us in this time and place when while we may not be terribly attentive to the ‘evil’ in our neighbor unless that evil threatens or harms us. We are certainly deeply aware of all sorts of other differences. Indeed, one can hardly get people from different learnings on the political spectrum to hold a civil conversation whether we have judged the other as ‘evil’ or not, and I am afraid, that all too often that is precisely what we tend to do. What would it look like if we were to heed the vision Jesus offers now of all of us ‘growing alongside each other?’ Might we, in fact, be irreparably harmed if we simply remove the other or remove ourselves from the proximity of those who are different from us? Or those who appear to be as wasteful or as threatening as a weed? And isn’t this the case all the time? Aren’t we, in fact, stronger in our diversity regardless of what those differences are?

It may well be said that in its lessons this is one of the most practical parables that Jesus ever told. Professor Barclay writes:

‘It teaches us that there is always a hostile power in the world, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Our experience is that both kinds of influence act upon our lives. The influence which helps the seed of the word flourish and to grow, and the influence which seeks to

destroy the good seed before it can produce fruit at all. The lesson is that we must be forever on our guard.’

Barclay continues to say: ‘It teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the kingdom and those who are not. Some people may appear good and may in fact be bad; and others appear to be bad and may yet be good. We are much too quick to classify people and label them good or bad without knowing all the facts.’

‘It teaches us not to be so quick with our judgements. If the reapers had had their way, they would have tried to tear out the darnel and they would have torn out the wheat as well. Judgment had to wait until the harvest came. I believe in the end, we will be judged, not by any single act or stage in our lives, but by our whole lives. Judgment cannot come until the end. It is possible to make a great mistake, and then redeem ourselves and, by the grace of God, atone for it by making the rest of life a lovely thing. It is also possible to live an honorable life and then in the end wreck it all by a sudden collapse into sin. No one who sees only part of a thing can judge the whole; and no one who knows only part of an individual’s life can judge the whole person.’

‘It teaches us that judgment does come in the end. Judgment is not hasty, but judgment comes. It may be that, humanly speaking, in this life the sinner seems to escape the consequences – but there is a life to come. It may be that, humanly speaking, goodness never seems to enter into its reward – but there is a new world to redress the balance of the old.’

‘It teaches us that the only person with the right to judge is God. It is God alone who can discern the good and the bad; it is God alone who sees all of an individual and all of a person’s life. It is God alone who can judge.’

So, Professor Barclay says; ‘ultimately this parable is two things – it is a warning not to judge people at all, and it is a warning that in the end there comes the judgment of God.’

Might the 'grace' in this passage simply be that you and I are not to judge and in our not judging the one who first presented as a 'weed' might have the chance to show oneself to be 'wheat' after all? Could it be that in our not judging, we simply give the 'other' time?

It is just that simple, it is just that hard

Thanks be to God.