

SERMON TEXT FOR PROPER 11A

PREACHED JULY 23, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43; Isaiah 44.6-8; Psalm 86.11-17; Romans 8.12-25

When you have the opportunity to meet God (like, when you die), what is it that you would like to **ask** God? What **questions** about this life would you like God to answer? (*allowing time for responses*) For many people, the most burning question they have is, "Why does God allow evil in the world?"

A **simple explanation** to that question is that God allows evil in the world because God has given us human beings **free will**, and some human beings - probably **all** of us at **times** - choose to do **evil** over good. "But why doesn't God **intervene**?" you ask. Well, that's a topic for another sermon. But **good and evil** is the theme for today's message.

Obviously there is **no shortage of evil** in the world - while we know that there is also a lot of **good** alongside it. Jesus talks about this very thing in today's gospel story, the **parable of the weeds in the field**. The parable begins as **many** of Jesus' parables do: "*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.*" But in the dark of night an enemy came and **sabotaged** the field, planting **weeds** among the good seeds so that the weeds and the wheat grow up together. The slaves ask the sower, "*What shall we do with these weeds?*" He tells them to **leave them alone**, that at the harvest time the reapers will collect the weeds and **burn** them and will put the wheat in the barn.

The **weed** that Jesus refers to here is one that, in its earliest stages, closely resembles **wheat**, making it almost **impossible to identify**. As the plants **mature**, the **roots** of the weeds and the wheat **intertwine**, making them almost impossible to **separate**. Attempts to pull the **weeds** will also pull the **wheat**. However, separation is **necessary** because that weed is both **bitter** and mildly **toxic**. If it is not removed before **milling** the wheat, it will **ruin** the flour.

So, we come back to that age-old question: **why is there evil in the world?** Why does God permit evil to grow and flourish? Jesus doesn't answer these questions directly in this parable, but he does say that **we should let evil and good exist or "grow" side by side, and let God do the (eventual) destroying.**

Now, it seems to me that Jesus offers this response for **two reasons**:

- 1)** Because humanity is **incapable** of separating out the "weeds" without damaging the whole harvest; and
- 2)** Because **God has appointed the right time**, and in the meantime there is room for repentance.

So first, Jesus uses this parable to point out that human beings are not **competent** to make the kind of judgments implied in separating wheat from weeds. In pulling out the **weeds**, we may be pulling up **wheat** as well. So we don't need to **worry** ourselves about trying to distinguish between wheat and weeds, between good and evil. Unlike God, **we cannot know people's hearts** – or where their lives might take them – or their potential for **redemption**. God has not equipped us with the

insight necessary to weed the garden. We see only the **surface** of people, but God sees their **heart**.

So we must learn to accept the fact that, **in the end, God will set things right**. In the **interim**, we're stuck with people who **offend** us by their values, their beliefs, their lifestyle, their mannerisms, their speech, even the way they dress. We're stuck with people who try to **shove their opinions** down our throats. We're stuck with people who are **rude** and **insensitive** and **who treat people unfairly**. We're struck with people whom we find it really difficult to **tolerate**.

So Jesus says: **Don't do the weeding yet**. Wait till the **harvest**, and then you'll be sure, because **God** will know what's really **good**, and what's really **bad**. It's not **our job** to decide who are **good** people and who are **evil** people, because most likely we'll be **wrong**. Just **trust God** with **your** life and **theirs**.

Now, I'll admit that this is **easier said than done**. Who among us has **not questioned** why God **allows** evil to grow and thrive? Who among us has not wanted to **take matters into our own hands** and root out the evil in our midst? Who has not wanted to be rid of the **bad apples** that spoil the barrel? Yet a wise man - Fred Rogers of *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* - once said, "Have you ever noticed that the very same people who are **bad sometimes** are the very same people who are **good sometimes**?"

So Jesus says that we should simply **go about our business**. Our job is to be **wheat**, not weeds. We're not called to be the **farmer**; rooting up weeds is not part of **our** job description. We may **like** to rain down hellfire and brimstone, to **judge** others, but Jesus counsels us otherwise. Jesus tells us to **just be the wheat**. Grow in the row in which you were planted. Grow **tall** and **strong** and **crowd out** the weeds. As St. Francis said, "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

Let your influence **shade out** or **deprive** the weeds of the sunlight and the water that they need to survive. Don't be a stalk of wheat in a field **by yourself**. **Grow with others** in a community of wheat. And don't worry about the **weeds growing** nearby. Trust that the **farmer** is going to take care of those weeds at the appropriate time. God has a **plan**. We can **trust** the plan.

So, through this parable Jesus encourages us to remember that **God has appointed the right time for the harvest**, and in the meantime there is room for repentance. In due course – **in God's time** – the **harvest** and the **judgment** will come. **But that judgment is up to God, not us**.

Taken this way, the parable is a story about **grace**. For no matter how **big** or shameful **ours** or **others' weeds** (read: our sins) become, God is ready and waiting to help us to **weed them out** and to graciously **accept** God's gift of forgiveness and grace. Thanks be to God!