

Weeds Among the Wheat

July 23, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?”

If God made the world and everything in it, then why is it the way it is?

If the way of God is generosity, why does self-interest always seem to be getting the upper hand? If the way of God is mercy, why does ruthlessness so often seem to dominate the human story?

And how are we, as people of faith, called to live in such a world?

Let’s pray for the Spirit’s light:

*God be in my words, and in my speaking;
God be in our hearts, and in our listening;
God be in our minds, and in our understanding. Amen.*

There are weeds among the wheat.

Something is wrong—very wrong.

As people of faith, we trust and believe that love is the source and purpose for existence. Day by day, we try to align our lives with that truth, we try to learn to face the world with kindness and compassion...

...only to open our newspapers, or click on the day’s headlines, and find that they’re rewriting the history books in Florida to teach schoolchildren that enslaving people gave them valuable life skills; that border authorities have put razor wire along the banks of the Rio Grande to force men, women, and children back into the river; that airstrikes have destroyed another Ukrainian cathedral.

If God is God... why doesn’t the world reflect that reality?

This isn’t a new problem. Indeed, you could read the entire Bible, chapter by chapter, as an attempt to grapple with the same unyielding contradiction. This is God’s world, but it sure is hard to tell that by looking at it.

As Scripture tells it, no sooner has God created the heavens and the earth and filled them with life, than a serpent starts sowing seeds of doubt in the human heart about whether God is really to be trusted.

The serpent’s words are like the seeds in our parable. They take root where they were never meant to grow. How could such a thing happen? Where does the serpent’s urge to spoil things spring from—and why doesn’t God do something to stop it?

It's a mystery the Bible will grapple with again and again and again—book by book, chapter by chapter.

The serpent story is never mentioned again in the Hebrew scriptures. In Jewish thought, there's no developed idea of original sin springing from our first parents. I doubt most of them took the story literally: They understood it as a work of poetic imagination, not intended to be read as history.

And yet the very next chapter brings us the story of one brother killing another out of jealousy, and from there things just seem to go downhill. By the time we get to the Noah story, starting in chapter 7, humankind is starting to look like a colossal mistake.

It's not one of the lectionary readings for this Sunday, but if you'll bear with me I'd like to spend some time pondering the Noah story today, because it's been haunting me for years, and because I think it has something to say to our gospel lesson today.

Listen to how the story begins.

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”

Notice that heart-to-heart connection, Walter Brueggemann says; the wickedness of human heart registers directly in God's own heart.

“So, the LORD said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’”

It seems you can't blot out one problem species without wiping out every other species as well. Life is organically interconnected that way.

At the last moment God relents and decides to save mating pairs of every creature, human and animal—to grant creation a future.

And the waters rise and cleanse the earth, and the waters subside, and the creatures go forth into new life, and God takes a deep breath and says, Never again.

“I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

Wait—what?

After all that rain, all that death and destruction, we're exactly where we started with the human heart? It inclines to evil—that's what we're left with? Nothing has changed?

Well, not exactly nothing. God has changed.

The act of destruction has left God horrified and shaken. From now on, no matter how bad things get, there will be no more erasing.

*“As long as the earth endures,” God says,
“seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.”*

The problem of evil isn’t going anywhere. But hereafter, God’s response to it will be... to hold back. To abide with a flawed creation—even if it means bearing with injustice and wrongdoing.

Is God right to let evil go unpunished, with all the suffering that follows from it? What do you think?

In truth this is one of the most subversive stories in the whole Bible, and it’s strange to me that no one seems to notice the radical theological vision that’s unfolding here. People either focus on the animals—so fun for the kids! or on the horror of the flood—proof, some will say, of the barbarity of religion. Either way we miss the point.

The world of the Bible was a world of retributive justice. Not only in Israel, but across the ancient world, the response to wrongdoing was punishment. It was a way to keep criminality and violence from spreading and consuming the population, and it had the full backing of religion. The people who mete out justice always think they are acting on behalf of the gods.

Yet by the end of the Noah story, this whole assumption has been skillfully undercut, by storytellers who understood the danger of linking God with retribution. We think we shudder at the Noah story because we’re morally enlightened, not like those crude Israelites. But the horror is the point. We’re *supposed* to shudder. The whole reason for the story is to call the idea of divine vengeance into question: to ask, would a God worthy of the name of God do such a thing?

Or in the words of Abraham, pleading for the people of Sodom a few chapters on:

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

In a few profound and deeply poetic chapters, the Genesis storytellers have taken on the very definition of justice and transformed it—from retribution to something much slower, much more holistic, much more patient.

Because it turns out nothing is saved when you go about trying to expunge evil from the earth. As the Noah story so poignantly reveals, the problem is in the soil. In the very clay of the human heart.

It’s a lesson so radical, so countercultural for its time that many later biblical thinkers would brush past it or forget all about it. But like a thin gold thread, it runs through all of scripture, flashing out occasionally in gleams of surprising light.

The followers of Jesus must have hoped that this time things would be different. Cleansed in the floodwaters of baptism, reoriented to the world by the reformist teachings of Jesus, bearing the radical good news of resurrection, they must have imagined a community set free from sin—a light for the world to follow.

Instead, like the family of Noah on the far side of the flood, early Christians found themselves struggling with the same old conflicts, the same old struggles and temptations. How could this be? And what should they do? Should they throw the offenders out of the church? Should they try to keep the movement pure?

“Do you want us to go and tear those weeds out by the roots?” the laborers ask.

“No,” the Sower says; *“for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.”*

I'm not a gardener, but even I have a hard time with this answer. This is God's field we're talking about! Those weeds don't belong there. Hand me my hoe! I'll get down on my hands and knees if I have to and pull those intruders out by the roots.

But Jesus the Sower says to let them be. God will sort the weeds from the wheat at the end of the age. If we try to do it, we'll end up tearing the wheat out along with the weeds, and then there won't be a harvest.

Why? Because all life is interconnected. Every heart is bound up with every other heart, all our roots growing together in the one field.

It's tempting to me to think of myself as a grain of wheat, and that guy over there as the weed that threatens the crop. But the Spirit is whispering to me that it isn't so. The field isn't just the world out there. The field is me—a mix of weeds and wheat growing side by side. Nor can I can't pretend to be pure and separate from the textbook-rewriters or the razor-wire-stringers or the people launching missiles at cities. Our lives are intertwined. I'm complicit in the injustice of the world in ways I sometimes recognize and sometimes don't. It's the world I was born into.

We will all perish together, or we will all be saved together. Jesus aims to save us, even if it takes a very long time.

And so, we wait, abiding in his patient love, doing our best to absorb the nutrients of his radical teaching: love for neighbors, forgiveness of enemies, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, and the humility to remember that we are, at best, works in progress.

I'll close with the words of the late John Lewis, the great civil rights icon, who offers this blessing for the journey. I need to hear this today; maybe you do too.

“You are a light,” Lewis says. *“You are the light. Never let anyone—any person or any force—dampen, dim or diminish your light. Study the path of others to make your way easier and more abundant. Lean toward the whispers of your own heart, discover the universal truth, and follow its dictates. [...] Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won. Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice. And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of love, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a Beloved Community that is finally at peace with itself.”*

May it be so. And may the beautiful, imperfect people of God say Amen.