

Sermon for Proper 11A

The Text: Matthew 13:24-30

Today's text tackles some big questions, like –

- Why does our good God permit evil to continue in the world that He created and redeemed through His Son?
- Why do good people suffer?
- Why does He let people, even His people, flout His will to the harm of others?
- Why does God give us new birth and life in Baptism, but leave the old Adam, sin and death, in us?

Our text doesn't give us direct answers, so much as it speaks to getting our focus right. As much as we would like to rid this world and our own lives of evil and sin, a spiritual witch-hunt would only increase the destruction of goodness. So – why does God tolerate heart-breaking evil in the world? Jesus says it is because God wants every grain of wheat in His barn.

The parable says a farmer sowed good seed in his field. While he slept, in the dark his enemy snuck around sowing poisonous weeds. Some plants, like young black oats and wheat, are hard to tell apart until the plants mature. The farmer and workers were happy, until they saw all the weeds among the wheat. The servants were gob-smacked – Didn't you plant good seed? How come all the weeds? Their solution: Get in there and rip up the weeds. But the farmer restrains them: Let everything grow together until harvest-time, when it's clear what are weeds for burning and wheat for the barn.

According to Jesus' explanation of this parable, the farmer is Himself, the field is the world, the seed is the Word of God, the enemy is the devil, the wheat is people who organise their lives on God's Word, the weeds are those disconnected from Christ and His merciful gifts, the reapers are angels, and the harvest is the Last Day before all we'll experience is eternal, whether bonfire or barnful.

The parable has 2 basic thoughts:

Firstly, it deals with God's future and final judgment, when, in the end, Christ and all whose trust in Him are vindicated, whereas Satan and all he's kept hoodwinked cop it. In the end, the weeds don't prevent the Lord's harvest.

Secondly, it concerns the here and now, which includes both good and evil, Christ and devil, faith and unbelief all mixed up. Through sermons, songs, prayers, devotions, and conversations, the Lord sows and grows His good Word – and the devil scoots around sowing doubt, despair, and disbelief:

"Is God's Word true?"

"Is it the Word of God?"

"Is sin a big deal?"

"Surely there can't be a heaven or a hell!"

"When the pastor spoke, was that really GOD forgiving sins and giving absolution!?"

"Some water with the Word and the baptised become kids of God!?"

The devil sure weeds up our world and hearts. Sometimes it feels like there's hardly any goodness, and wheat.

If we focus on the weeds, we'll likely lose sight of the wheat and likely begin to doubt the Sower – like the farmer's servants, almost accusing: You did plant good seed, didn't you? If we focus on what is wrong with the world, we will lose sight of the one thing that is right with this world – namely, that "God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life"; that (as today's Epistle declared) in Christ we "become the very children of God", no longer unseen, unnoticed, uncared for. We belong with purpose here and hereafter as "God's heirs".

The one thing right with this world is Jesus Christ for me. But if our focus is on the weeds, on wickedness, then we can start thinking there is something wrong with God – that He's not as merciful and good as He claims to be, or else He'd fix things. Or He is not all-powerful and interested in my little life, despite what He says ... forgetting, in that moment, that His own Son died and lives now for me!

The parable keeps perspective: An enemy did this. How did sin, disease, death and doing our own thing get into the universe that God originally made good? Don't blame God or His Word. An enemy did this.

So, what to do about weeds among wheat? The servants' solution is to sharpen their hoes. The farmer will have none of it: Leave both to grow together until harvest-time! That means wheat and weeds get the same treatment until harvest-time – the same water, the same sunshine, the same compost, the same cultivating. God causes His rain to fall on the good and the wicked alike (Matthew 5:45). It doesn't seem fair at all – but that's God's grace for you!

The servants are preoccupied with weeds, the farmer with wheat. When Jesus' disciples come to Him for the inside line on this parable, they say, Explain the parable of the weeds ... when the parable is about the wheat!

God's goodness to us in Christ is not about a holier-than-thou eradication of evil, but the cultivation of true life now and eternal life hereafter in Christ. The weeds are there and are serious, but, in the ultimate scheme of things, they're only a temporary bother to what God is doing. His focus is on the wheat not the weeds, and He doesn't want to lose a single stalk of wheat to some over-zealous weed-

pulling by His disciples. So He patiently tolerates all the weeds rather than risk uprooting a single plant of wheat.

The farmer's zeal for his wheat is God's determination in Christ to save us and, if possible, all people. Why does God tolerate all the evil in the world and not weed it out right now? So that we have time to come to fruitful faith and trust in Jesus. He has done this so that we can be raised now from death and to give us opportunities to give life to others. We can do this as spouses, friends and neighbours living a life-giving rather than weed-choking existence.

Evil and sin is so deeply entangled in our world and lives, we can't eliminate it without condemning ourselves and destroying God's harvest.

Let's not try to sort the sinner from the saint before the end of the age. The church is here as God's gift to the world not to eliminate sin from the world, but to apply Jesus' death and resurrection to the lives of sinners. We live to cultivate wheat, not yank weeds out of the ground. Now is the time for awakening people to what sin is and what it does to them, and to being forgiving in the name of Jesus, not condemning people. Leave the judgment to Jesus. The Church is not here to make people good or to clean up society, but to resurrect sinners through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name.

That doesn't mean we don't work for social justice or just laws or good government or give help to those who are poor and oppressed – all that is part of loving our neighbour. Those who are loved, love; those who are resurrected, resurrect; those who are forgiven, forgive. But the aim is not some kind of a "weed-free" Christian society or personal life. The weeds and wheat are much too entangled and can only be separated by the razor-sharp judgment of Christ in the resurrection.

I'm sure we'd like to have our world freed from the terror of the evil that grips it, our hearts free from wicked desires and deceit, and our tongues free of blasphemy and prejudice. We would all like to be free of the disease and the death that dogs us. We want the new creation now, and not have to wait for it.

Be patient. The Lord is patient. "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance [and life]" (2 Peter 3:9).

When the Lord comes again, everything will be changed, forever – except for one thing: God's loving action towards us, the love in which we have believed and hoped and endured now, the Loving One who has found us and would still find others now.

We are a precious harvest to Jesus, so precious that He is willing to put up with weeds, until the right time. Always know – each day, the Lord never loses sight of us, His harvest.

Amen.