

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
8th Sunday after Pentecost, year A, July 23, 2023
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca
text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Any gardener can tell you, a weed is simply a plant growing where it is not wanted. Unlike plants grown for their beauty, or for shade, or food, weeds can interfere with growth in so many ways. They can strangle those which have been planted; stealing their nutrients and diminishing their yield. The weed planted amongst the wheat in Jesus' parable is known as tares or darnel, which is sometimes called false wheat. Because it closely resembles wheat until the ear appears, by the time it is discovered it may be too late to remove it without damaging the crop; as was the case in Jesus' story.

Deliberately planting darnel in a field of wheat was a truly evil act; done with the intent to cause harm to those who depended on the wheat for their bread. Jesus does not shy away from naming the presence of evil and sin in the world; and he addresses the way in which evil undermines that which is good and life giving and causes harm to innocent people. He does warn that it is hard to judge.

Jesus explained to his disciples that the wheat in the field represented the children of the kingdom and the bad seed the children of the evil one, which would be sorted out and burned at end of the age. We might think that we have good and evil all figured out. In some cases, like slavery or genocide, it is pretty clear. And we have the commandments and our own consciences to guide us in determining what is right and what is wrong. But when we disagree, when the ethics of a situation are murky, when cultural differences or unconscious bias are in the mix; deciding who is good and who is evil is in itself a harmful exercise.

Throughout history, parables and bible passages such as the one heard today, have been wrongly interpreted to justify labeling others as the enemy, as though they were evil weeds sprouting up amongst the chosen. And making sweeping judgments about those who differ from us continues. People are put into camps; sometimes literally- who is in who is out, who is worthy, who is deemed worthless or evil; all of this occupying so much of our public discourse and our social relationships.

Yes, we may be able to decide what is right and good in some circumstances. But in many cases, it is hard to tell. Like the darnel posing as the wheat right up until the ear appears. Theologian Judy Cannato says that we are often fooled by things that mimic what is real. "Indeed" she writes, "we live in a culture that flaunts the phony and thrives on glittering fabrication. We are so bombarded by the superficial and the trivial that we can lose our bearings and give ourselves over to a way of living that drains us of our humanity. Seduced by the superficial, we lose the very freedom we think all our acquisitions will provide. When we are engaged in the experience and practice of radical amazement, we begin to distinguish between the genuine and the junk.

Caught up in contemplative awareness and rooted in love, we begin to break free from cultural confines and embrace the truth that lies at the heart of all reality: We are one."

The truth about people... and discerning good and evil... the genuine and the junk.. is complicated. In reality, in most circles, in most families and in most organizations, even churches; we are a mixture of both weeds and wheat. Our own personalities are a mixed bag- of strengths and weaknesses. -of good intentions and selfishness, of faithfulness and integrity -and indifference and spite. We may need to wait and let God sort it out and show us which is which.

In the Fellowship of the Ring, Gandalf confronts Samwise Gamgee about his murderous rage towards Golum. Gandalf explained to Sam that it wouldn't be right to kill Golum; for even Golum had his own purpose in the great scheme of things. Gandalf said, "Even the wise cannot see the end of all things." As it turns out it is Golum who ultimately destroys the Ring. As Jesus states in the parables of the Wheat and the Tares, for all our knowledge we cannot see the end of all things and so final judgment is reserved for the One who can.

Each and every person we meet is God's beloved child, searched out, known and loved by God. We have never met a person who is not deeply loved by God. And so we ask God to show us where weeds have sprung up amongst the wheat in our own lives. Those things which choke out the good we want to bring forth: all the goodness of God's kingdom -the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, the joy and wonder of all creation, the resolve to love our neighbors, the desire to work for justice and peace, and the power of the Holy Spirit to assist us in all these things.

We acknowledge our need for God's help in this endeavor. And turn to Jesus-our guide and advocate, our savior and our Lord. to show us the paths that lead to life; to lead us in the ways that we should go.

Let us pray. Loving God, the growth of your kingdom is a mystery to us. While we would like dramatic, clear signs of your power at work, you offer a quiet, gently growing kingdom. Nothing is hidden from you O God, and you know us better than we know ourselves. Send us your Spirit that we may understand the meaning of Jesus' parables for we trust that they are as true in our own lives as they were in the time that he spoke them. We ask this for the sake of your love. Amen.