

THE WEEDS WITHIN

GENESIS 28:10-19

MATTHEW 13:24-30; 36-43

JULY 23, 2017

TOM WHARTENBY

“THE FIELD IS THE WORLD...”

So said Jesus long ago as he tried to explain to his puzzled disciples the parable of the wheat and the tares. I find myself wishing Jesus had said a bit more. He tells us that the weeds are the work of God’s enemy, whom apparently God could crush in a heartbeat. So why doesn’t God destroy His enemy thus cutting off the weeds at their source? Genesis tells us that the entire universe was created in six days; so why is it taking God thousands of years to redeem it? The parable does not say, and thereby leaves me at least, unsatisfied. Am I missing something? Are there hints of answers to these and other questions hidden in the folds and creases of this parable?

This odd parable makes several things perfectly clear: the origin of evil, its continuation, and the coming kingdom of God are all mysteries. Realizing that our minds will remain within the penumbra of these mysteries, let us, nevertheless, explore the depths of this shadowy parable.

JESUS TELLS US THAT THE SOWER OF THE GOOD SEED IS THE SON OF MAN.

The sower is also Jesus, the Son of God; the good seed therefore comes from God. The good seed in this parable is not the word of God as it was in the Parable of the Sower, but rather the Children of God planted by Jesus. These are those who trust God, those who obey God, that is to say, those who love God.

The bad seed in this parable are those who neither trust nor obey God. They are those who live their lives apart from God, as if God did not exist or as if He simply did not matter. They are the planting of the devil, God’s sworn enemy. Now if the

concept of the devil leaves you cold, think of the bad seed as the planting of all the forces in creation and human society which battle God's coming kingdom.

THOSE IN THE PARABLE WHO WANT TO TEAR OUT THE WEEDS ARE OBVIOUSLY DISCIPLES OF JESUS.

Think of the "sons of thunder" wanting to call down fire from heaven to consume those who were part of their group. Matthew uses this parable to speak to members of his Church who want to root out the bad seed from the world, or more likely from the church itself. Notice they begin by asking the farmer about the quality of seed he planted, "You did plant good seed didn't you?" At a deeper level this is a question directed towards God: why are there weeds? Was it God's intention that there be moral evil? Was it His will that there be those who oppose His rule on earth? Was God sloppy and careless in the planting stage? If not, why the weeds? Jesus categorically denies that God intended or wants there to be evil. Jesus says that this is the work of an enemy, without answering the next question: why God permit His enemies to do this?

THE ZEALOUS DISCIPLES WANT TO TEAR OUT THE EVIL WEEDS FROM THE GOOD WHEAT.

Surely all of us who want to fix things and put matters right can relate to these disciples. They want to get rid of the weeds before they ruin the harvest-no doubt good agricultural practice in the kingdom of men and women, but apparently not in the kingdom of God. Jesus forbids ripping out the weeds. Does this mean that God is indifferent to evil and unaware of its terrible effects? No, just one look at the cross of Jesus Christ gives that answer. God knows the danger of evil, as well as its terrible effects, and God suffers because of it. But God's way of dealing with evil is not our way. Truth be told, God's ways are a complete mystery to us: **In the Old Testament**

- He spares Cain and even protects him from others who would execute him for his brother's murder, thus risking that Cain will sow more bad seed in the world.

- He makes a covenant with Jacob who manipulates his blind father and cheats his slow-witted brother.
- He remains faithful to David who commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband killed.

In the New Testament:

- He worries more about the one lost sheep than He does about the ninety-nine sheep who follow the rules!
- He anxiously awaits the return of the no-account son and celebrates when he comes home, even though this alienates his righteous son.
- He forgives a murdering terrorist dying next to His son on a cross—perhaps this act is the key to unlocking the parable’s meaning.

This parable of the wheat and the tares teaches us that God is willing to bear the consequences of permitting evil to exist for a while so that the maximum amount of good might be harvested.

It even suggests that in God’s kingdom weeds can be transformed into wheat. Slick Jacob became Faithful Israel, the father of the twelve tribes, including Judah, the ancestor of both King David and King Jesus. A man who lived a life of violence turns to Jesus and reaches out for the kingdom of God at the last possible minute. No doubt many if not all in Matthew’s congregation would have relegated this man to the fires of hell.

THE POINT OF THE PARABLE BEGINS TO EMERGE FROM THE SHADOWS.

Jesus is not interested in the explaining the origins or even the continuation of evil. He is not interested in defending God before the bar of human judgment. ***Jesus is proclaiming the nature of the Kingdom of God by revealing something about the nature of the Kingdom’s God.***

- The Kingdom's God is so powerful that He can permit evil to grow until the end of history, and still be able to defeat it.
- The Kingdom's God is patient, so patient that He will wait till the end of time to allow even the most slow growing, late developing seed to mature into wheat. The Kingdom’s God is thus loving in ways we find difficult to understand.
- The Kingdom’s God trusts in the power of his love.

- The Kingdom's God is also just, and in the end He will put everything right; He will purge evil and vindicate good.

This is the God's nature; this is God's way.

IT IS AT THIS POINT THAT *WE* MUST REMEMBER WHO *WE* ARE, WHAT OUR NATURE IS.

We are Christians, the adopted children of God. Jesus is trying to teach us that we are called to be model human beings whose goal is to teach all humanity what it means to be truly human. Genesis teaches that human beings, male and female, were made in the image of God. **Tom Wright calls us “God reflectors”.** We are called to reflect God to all creatures great and small. God is bringing in His Kingdom. But it is of the nature of this kingdom to be more like a planted crop than a constructed building. Even God cannot manufacture a harvest; even God must plant and wait. **This is so because the kingdom is all about love, as we would expect the kingdom of an all-loving God to be.**

God can give men and women the ability to be loved and to love in return, but He cannot create loving humans. He can create a creature that can grow into loving but not build a loving creature. Love, by its very nature, cannot be compelled, cannot be forced, and cannot be prefabricated. But love can be rejected, love can be resisted, and love can be frustrated. This is the message of the parable of the wheat and the tares. Human resistance to the divine love is what's contaminating the crop and extending the time till the harvest.

OUR PROPER ROLE IS NOW CLEAR.

God has not sent us into the world to attack the weeds, to root out evil, or to purge it of any and all impurities. In short, God has not sent us into the world to judge the world. We are not up to that task. That is God's task, one He has delegated to His son who died for the world reflecting God's great love for it. ***Our task is to show forth the love of God as clearly and as brightly as we can.***

- Our task is to proclaim that love in our words and in our action
- Our task is to let that love bear fruit in compassionate living.
- Our task is to be as patient with the world and those in it as we can, because God is patient.

There is no doubt that our world is a terrible tangle of wheat and weeds. Truth be told, each of us is a terrible tangle of wheat and weeds as well. Our genuine love is entangled with our self-love. Nevertheless, the Gospel is that God will sort it all out in the end and bring in a great harvest. The Gospel is that this harvest will include many of us, like Jacob of old, or like the thief on the cross, who look for all the world like die-hard weeds. This parable proclaims loudly that nothing is impossible with God, and we are called to live trusting in His loving power and hoping for His coming rule.

This is the Good News of Jesus Christ brought to us by Matthew, one of God's great reflectors. May we be so as well.