

Year A Proper 16 Life is Complicated Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Super-hero shows are great. Superman, Captain America...They have good guys and they have bad guys. You know who you're supposed to cheer for and you know who is supposed to end up behind bars. Life seems so simple...black and white...good and bad.

Well, Matthew throws a wrench into things with this gospel story. Life is not simple. Life is not black and white...good and bad. Life is complicated.

Three out of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – often have the same or very similar stories in them. The parable of the sower that we explored last week, *that* one is in all three of them. But this story – the parable of the wheat and weeds – is only found in Matthew's gospel. There's another thing that's only found in Matthew – the word "church". The word church occurs just three times in the gospels and all three of those times are in Matthew.

Matthew, more than any other gospel writer, speaks directly to the church.

Matthew writes to the church with care and concern. He wants the church to thrive and he wants to guide them in how to do that faithfully.

Picture a dark and dusty cave where we are about to unroll an ancient scroll we've just pulled from a cracked clay jar. With fingers trembling in excitement, we begin to read the faded lettering... "From Matthew" it says. Then, in shock we realize the letter is addressed to us. In Matthew's gospel story today, we hear a 2000-year-old message to *us*.

For whatever reason, people hear this story and believe those weeds – the seeds planted by the enemy – those weeds must be people who are different from us.

People love to villainize or disdain others who are different. For some people the difference is the colour of their skin. For others it's a person's sexual orientation. For still others, it's a person's socio-economic status – especially when someone doesn't have a job or a home. There's a newspaper story that tells of a 70-year-old woman, determined to live the kingdom life. And so, having a spare bedroom in her basement, she welcomes into her home a man who had no home. This man went from living on the street to living in her basement. In stunned amazement and admiration, the reporter said to the woman, "You were really taking a chance." This homeless man could have assaulted her, maybe even killed her. He could have stolen every valuable she had in her house and then disappeared. Society, in general, is conditioned to see homeless people on the street and think less of them – they probably have no job because they're just lazy. We are conditioned to believe that people on the street must be trouble somehow – drug addicts or criminals. We don't know them and they're different from us, they make us a little nervous, and we tend to judge them harshly. But Jesus has news for us. Those seeds planted by the enemy grow into weeds that look just like us. It is not people who are different who are the weeds, Jesus says. The weeds are people just like us.

Apparently, people with hard feelings against their neighbours back in Jesus' time, got some revenge by ruining their neighbour's crops with a weed called "darnel." [*zizania*.] Darnel, as it grew to maturity, was identical to wheat. The only difference between the two became obvious at the end of the growing cycle. The darnel didn't bear fruit like the wheat. Although it looks the same, it turns out to be useless. We learn that we cannot tell good from bad by appearances – who people are, what people look like, what sort of car they drive, who they marry, or

even if they are in dirty clothes sitting on a downtown street. We tell good from bad by the bearing of fruit. The good seed bears good fruit – acts of love and kindness, compassion and care, humbleness and generosity overflow in the lives of people who love God, who are filled with God's love, and show that love in relationship to all others in God's creation.

Jesus has more news for us in this parable. Because it takes so long for it to become obvious that the darnel is not wheat, the roots are all tangled up together and can't be separated – the good is mixed in with the bad. This tells us two very important things. First, some of those seeds of the enemy get planted in us. No one is perfect – we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When someone chooses to live according to life in God's kingdom and is baptized into this life, this person makes promises to God to be a certain way and to live a certain way. None of these promises involve being perfect or flawless. Rather, we acknowledge that we will mess up sometimes and, when we do, we will repent and return to God.

The other thing that having tangled up roots tells us is that, even when we do strive to live according to God's way, we are tangled up in a sinful world. We all live in a broken world with broken systems in which we participate – often without knowing or thinking about it...The shirt we buy that was made by a 9 year old girl in a sweatshop in Bangladesh; the recycling we leave at the curb that the contractor throws in the dump because he is not going to make a profit on it; the produce we buy in the grocery store packaged by underpaid, underfed migrant workers living in overcrowded conditions that result in health issues and early

death. Indeed, we are broken people living in a broken world. Where does that leave us?

Well, Jesus has more news for us in the parable. This time, it is good news. Jesus introduces this parable by saying, “This is what the kingdom of God is like.” The kingdom of God. It means that even with the weeds around us and in us, we are living in the kingdom of God. The kingdom is here. It is not yet here in its perfection but it is here.

So what do we do about all of these weeds in God’s kingdom? According to Jesus, we leave them. That’s a bit shocking. That means, for many of us, giving up one of our favourite pastimes – judging others. We all do it but, Jesus asks us what business we have in pointing out the splinter in our neighbour’s eye when we have a log in our own. Remember, the roots are all tangled up together. Good and bad, weeds and wheat – it’s not clear cut like we would like it to be. We, with weeds ourselves, are not the ones to uproot other weeds around us. Jesus is clear on that – God will do the judging.

This doesn’t mean we do nothing. We are to focus our energy on bearing fruit. [This part of the body of Christ will be reaching out with the hands of Christ for another 140 years and more, with a focus on bearing fruit.] Bearing fruit means living a life that embodies life in God’s kingdom. It means living a life in imitation of Jesus Christ – a life of love, gentleness, humility, and forgiveness. As we work at growing the good in ourselves, filling ourselves up with the love of God, that love can choke out the weeds inside. It can also choke out the weeds in others and in the world around us because that life of love and compassion and forgiveness is the way of life Jesus used to fight all that was wrong, all that was

broken. He showed us a different way of living – caring not competing; giving out not raking in – living in the absolute love and peace of God’s kingdom and inviting others to join in. The Rev. Michael Marsh points out that the words, “Let them grow” that Jesus says referring to the weeds, can also be translated as “forgive them.” They are the same words Jesus spoke from the cross when he said, “Father, forgive them” (Lk.23:34). Forgive the people who cried out for my murder. Forgive the people who drove spikes through my hands and feet. Forgive them.

Forgiving does not mean saying, “It’s okay” and doing nothing. Forgiving is handing over bitterness, anger, hurt...handing these over to God so that they don’t choke out the goodness of God’s love in us. Forgiving allows God’s love to spread, to take over, to mend and heal. It goes hand in hand with not judging. Not judging does not mean not acting against what is wrong. Not judging means acknowledging that we do not have the final say on who is or is not going to have life with God. God does. Jesus tells us that God will send angels, at the right time, to remove all the causes of sin – the Greek word is *skandala*, and it means stumbling block...things that keep us from truly being in right relationship with God, with others, and with creation. These stumbling blocks will be burned. On many occasions throughout scripture, we hear of God removing sins, bad behaviours, evil from us and the world just as silver and gold are refined by a purifying fire (1 Peter 1:7; Is.1:25; Prov.17:3). It’s an analogy to help us understand what will happen when we meet God face to face. I read the story of one woman’s near-death experience and, whether or not you believe them to be true, they are common enough that we have a saying about “seeing the light” and even joke about “being drawn to the light” This woman’s story spoke of a light

that she describes as “brilliant enough to blind or burn” yet she was not harmed. She writes, “The light moved over and through me, washing every hidden place of my heart, removing all hurt and fear, transforming my very being into a song of joy” (<http://near-death.com/linda-stewart>). All stumbling blocks removed. Nothing but God’s love left behind. [This, I believe, is what our loved ones have experienced in death – transformed into God’s song of joy.]

The offer of this love and life with God is offered to everyone. Talk of judgement in the bible is always talk of the judgement of a loving, compassionate, forgiving God. For those who stubbornly refuse to accept God’s offer there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This is an ancient way of saying there will be grief. Hell, according to Father Brown on the BBC, hell is simply, “Life without God.”

This parable is a story of hope. It tells us that, despite the current brokenness of the world that still results in violence, injustice, and death, this is not the way the world will remain. We are growing in God’s kingdom, nourished by God’s love, drawn ever and always towards the time when God’s kingdom will be complete “on earth as in heaven.” “The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of [God],” says Jesus. We focus on bearing fruit and, by the end when it’s harvest time, we will have untangled some of those roots and maybe we will discover that some of the stalks that we thought were weeds, are bearing fruit along with us.