

Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Have you ever been caught up short by a first impression? You know what I mean ... those instant judgments we make about people just by their appearance or their accent. It goes something like this ... “Well, I know all I need to know about her ... she’s a tramp ... just look at all that make-up and that short skirt and she’s got an earring in her tongue.” Or how about this one, “I can tell just by looking at him that he’s up to no good. Look at him. He hasn’t had a haircut in months and his shoes have holes in them and he has alcohol on his breath. I’ve got no use for the likes of him!” Our judgements might not be quite that harsh, but we all make them. We all size people up and make decisions about who and what they are without really knowing anything about them ... including their name! If we’re lucky, we have a chance to find out what we do need to know about them ... and 9 times out of 10 we find out that our initial harsh judgements aren’t really accurate at all. Don’t get me wrong. First impressions are important, but they aren’t everything. Nothing in life, especially people, is quite that simplistic.

As I began to study the scripture passages for this Sunday in preparation for writing the sermon, I began to realize just how complex the gospel lesson is this morning. There are multiple ways to interpret just what Jesus is saying. On the surface of things, it would seem that Jesus has devised a very tidy dichotomy of good and evil. There are good seeds and there are evil seeds. The good person, the Son of Man sows the good seeds that will develop into wheat. And the Evil one sows the bad seeds that will reveal themselves to be tares ... or darnel ... as they grow and develop. Darnel, the official name for the bad seed or the weed, looks exactly like wheat when both plants begin to sprout. These plants are almost impossible to tell apart until they are mature and ripe for harvest. When they are ripe, the wheat has large golden berries on it that weigh the stem down. The darnel has small gray berries that put no weight on the stalk. And they have very different effects on people when they are consumed. Wheat has been called the ‘staff of life.’ It strengthens and nourishes people. Darnel, on the other hand, which is an amazing copycat of wheat and quite prolific in Israel, can actually make a person behave as if drunk and if too much darnel is consumed it can cause serious damage to the central nervous system. So these two plants are what Jesus uses in his allegory about good and evil. One plant is good. And one plant is bad. Simple enough.

But then I began to think about this dichotomy of good and evil. And I began to wonder. Does Jesus mean that there are some people who are simply ‘good’ and some people who are simply ‘bad?’ As neat and tidy as that sounds, such a clean cut separation of good and evil in the world

has not been my experience. It seems to me that there is both good and bad in everyone and both are everywhere. Perhaps in some people there seems to be quite a dominant amount of good and in others it seems that the bad has truly taken hold. But the idea of 'good' people and 'bad' people the way Jesus describes the good seed and bad seed doesn't seem to quite fit what we know of the world. All of us are fairly quick to confess that no one, except Jesus, is without sin, so then, there must be at least a little bit of evil in everyone.

So if it isn't a clear cut dichotomy ... good people versus bad people ... how else might we be able to think about this parable? It's intriguing that Jesus tells us that we aren't supposed to pull out the weeds. We're supposed to let them grow right alongside the wheat. Now that's not usually what we do in our own gardens. We tend to weed like crazy if we are really conscientious about our gardens. We don't want the weeds to choke out the good plants ... the ones we're nurturing and feeding and watering. We want to keep the good and pull out and destroy the bad. Right?

Well, we would think so, but that isn't what Jesus says in this parable. When he's asked if the weeds should be pulled, he says, "No. Let the bad seed develop along with the good." Jesus knows that the nature of the darnel ... the copycat of the wheat ... is to intertwine its roots with the roots of the wheat. So Jesus knows, that if they pull out the darnel, even if they are accurate about which plant is which, they will inadvertently damage the wheat as well. The intertwined roots are a characteristic that is good to know about this particular weed because it sheds a little light on why Jesus is saying to leave the two plants alone until harvest time.

Aren't we all intertwined? Don't we have relationships with and feelings for people who are not on the saintly level of Mother Teresa? Aren't we enmeshed with sinful people? We are, after all, sinful ourselves, so the chances are that the people we're entwined with are also sinful ... just like us ... part good and part bad. How can we possibly go through life without our relationships? What would happen to us if someone pulled the 'sinful' person we're entwined with out of our lives? And who's to say who is sinful enough to be considered a bad seed ... a weed. And who makes that decision? Remember how hard it is to tell the wheat from the darnel? If people are divided into good seed and bad seed, don't they also mimic each other? Isn't it hard to tell them apart? It is, indeed. Which is why Jesus says to us, "Let them develop together until harvest time." We aren't qualified to know which is the wheat and which is the darnel. Only God knows the heart and soul of a person. We can't possibly know.

But we fall into the trap of trying when we begin to divide people into 'these' people and 'those' people. We fall into that trap when we begin to scapegoat ... finding someone or some group to blame all our troubles on. It can happen to one person ... or it can happen to an entire

group of people. If it weren't for this person in our group, everything would be fine. That person is the troublemaker. If we just get rid of that person, we will be fine. But guess what? Even if we get rid of that one person, the troubles in our group will continue. It's simply that we will give someone else the chance to be the scapegoat. And we will eventually figure out how to eject them as well. This phenomenon can happen in school groups; it can happen in friendship groups; it can happen at work; and it can happen in a church. No one ever accomplishes anything by playing the blame game. And no group was ever improved by forcing someone to leave.

This phenomenon can happen in large groups as well. It can happen in countries. If we have any doubt of that, we need only to go back to fairly recent history and look at what happened to the Germans. They didn't see it coming; many of them didn't recognize it when it arrived, but in the process of trying to 'purify' their country they took the scapegoating phenomenon to its grotesque natural end in the holocaust of millions of Jews. Be very, very wary of anyone who is pushing a system toward purity. Be very skeptical of anyone who talks about a perfect society toward which we should all be working and which can only occur at the expense of some specific group of human beings ... that isn't us! Only God can do that. No human being ... and no group of human beings ... is going to be able to make those judgements about who should be 'in' and who should be 'out.' God alone does that, not us.

Jesus reminds us this morning that there will be an accounting for each one of us. There will be a day of reckoning when God will identify the darnel and God will identify the wheat. And God will give instructions to his angels about what to do with each.

But there's one other interesting complexity to this particular parable. Perhaps the wheat and the darnel are intertwined *within* us. Perhaps what God will do at the final reckoning ... at the day of accounting for our sins ... is disentangle all the wheat and darnel that is *within* us. We all are after all, sinful people. All of us have some impulses toward good and some impulses toward evil. Perhaps it is not that he will destroy us, but that he will refine us, so that when we enter his kingdom we enter it solely as wheat. We take darnel with us as we approach his kingdom. The darnel gets destroyed at God's hand, not at the hands of other human beings. The sin gets thrown into the fire and the wheat, the good seed that has matured, is what enters the kingdom of heaven. It is God who does the purifying. Not us. We can't tell the difference between the good seed and the bad seed ... but God can and does and God takes care of it and God takes care of us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.