

“The God of Paradox”
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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24 He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” 28He answered, “An enemy has done this.” The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” 29But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’ 37He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41The Son of Man will send

his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The Enneagram, which is made up of nine ways of seeing the world, is an ancient spiritual tool that helps us know ourselves better so that we can find ways to grow. I am a One on the Enneagram, sometimes called the Reformer, or if you ask Pastor Dexter and other folks who spend a little too much time with Ones, the Perfectionist. Ones have a high awareness of injustice in the world and a passionate drive to make things right. But one of the pitfalls of being a One is that we tend to see the world in binary - a one or a zero - a yes or a no - all right or all wrong.

And so I really resonate with those field workers who come to the householder and are like, “Hey, first of all, how did all of these weeds get here if you were planting good seeds AND can we please be the people who get to have the satisfying experience of yanking those weeds out of the ground?” The workers are laser-focused on the field, the differences between the wheat and the weeds, and they are already raising their hands asking if the field-owner will *pick them* to rip out those nasty weeds and purify the field that has been tainted by evil.

But I noticed something I’ve never noticed before this week as I read this parable. Jesus does not say, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a field....”, nor does he say, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to good seeds being

planted...” and he also does not say “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to workers in the field who are totally qualified to decide which plants are in and which plants are out.” No, Jesus begins by saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field...” SOMEONE. A person. Our God made flesh in Jesus. The disciples later ask Jesus to ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field,’ but even in explaining it to them, Jesus redirects their attention again back to ‘The one who sows the good seed... the Son of Man.’ We are obsessed with what is happening in that field and our role in policing and purifying it, but Jesus keeps telling us to *look at him*. So, let’s do just that. What do we learn about the God who this parable is all about?

First, we learn that the God in this parable plants good seeds and never the weeds. It’s the enemy who plants the weeds. And this confuses the workers at first, just like it confuses us. That’s why the workers (and us at times), ask God, “Did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” Phrases like “Everything happens for a reason” and “That person died because God needed another angel in heaven” are at times the trite sayings we come up with to paint over this confusion about *where* evil comes from. It’s easier to say that God is the cause of *all* things, good *and* bad, than it is to wrestle with evil’s presence in a world where God is supposed to be in charge. But this parable makes it crystal clear - the evil around us *never* comes from God. It comes from an enemy who sneaks in the night to plant weeds that are designed to choke the life out of God’s good seeds. And no matter how many false prophets have risen up throughout history to preach lies as theology, like all the

white pastors throughout American history who used Scripture to say that slavery was God's design or that the Gospel is always about personal salvation and never about the kind of social change led by Black communities to bring real liberation, those seeds of oppression were *never* from God's hand. This is why the weeds being gathered and burned in a furnace of fire is actually good news for the oppressed - for it means that all causes of evil, those forces in the world that choke out the life of God's good seeds, will be incinerated in the end. Ultimately, God's love wins, and all those death-dealing forces of violence will be cast out where they can no longer steal life from the world God loves.

The next thing we learn about this God seems to be in conflict with God's zero-tolerance policy for evil. We learn that the God in this parable is also annoyingly patient with the process of allowing things to grow. As a Perfectionist, this infuriates me. I hear my own voice again in those workers who are chomping at the bit to get all the weeds out of the garden NOW. And after talking to several gardeners and farmers this week, I don't at all understand the idea that we should let the weeds keep growing alongside the good seeds because the more those root systems grow underneath, the more they choke the good life out of the seeds God planted.

But I wonder if the God in this parable is responding not to the need for evil weeds to be removed from the field, but rather to the workers' arrogance in claiming to know which plants are wheat and which plants are weeds. Perhaps God's command to wait and to be patient is less about letting evil thrive and more about cutting off the impulse in ourselves to decide who is in and who is out. Because as I learned from several sources this week,

it's likely that the weeds mentioned in this parable looked strikingly similar to the wheat. We might think the weeds are obvious, calling attention to themselves with the signs of particular politicians in their yard or with a particular kind of post on Facebook. But what if the command to pump the brakes on pulling up the weeds and allowing them to grow together is actually an invitation to look again *at our own lives* for where the weeds are growing *in us* before we walk around pointing out the weeds that we are so sure lie outside of ourselves? We see white supremacy at work out there in our society but do we also see it in our own hearts, our own life choices, our own neighborhoods, our own ways of seeing the world? We point out injustice in other places and other people, but have we truly taken stock of the ways that the money we spend, the organizations we support, the people who employ us are perpetuating the oppression we are so quick to call out? As Theologian Joy Moore puts it, perhaps the question our God wants us to ask as we wait to pull the weeds is: "Are we the reason that someone else is not getting justice?"¹

So, for a person who loves binaries, this parable brings me into connection with a God who refuses to be left or right, a God who refuses to be a one or a zero, a God who revels in paradox and resists every attempt to be tamed by my need for control. Here we meet the God who comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. For those who find themselves profiting off the oppression of others - whether they came up with the idea themselves or they are complicit in systems of injustice that were built to benefit them - we are reminded that the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a God who plants good seed *only*

¹ Joy Moore, "Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Ordinary 16A)", July 19, 2020, Recorded via Zoom on June 11, 2020, for Working Preacher.

and who has no tolerance in the end for forces that steal life from God's beloved. And this news of real justice is good news for the oppressed because it afflicts those of us who remained cocooned in our own privilege while promising to make all things right for oppressed communities everywhere. And for those of us who are busying ourselves by pointing to every external cause of evil that should rightly be pulled up for the ground, we meet a God who has an irritating patience, a God who perhaps wants us to look again and see how *we* are riddled with the very weeds we despise. And this too is good news, for our God is promising not to leave us with these weeds in our hearts. We are so deeply loved that our God will not leave us the way She found us. The weeds will not win. The good seed is what will survive and thrive in us and in this world God loves.

I leave you with the words of theologian Debie Thomas about how to live in this strange paradox of faith: "Remember, the field is not ours, it is God's. Only God knows it intimately enough to tend it. Only God loves it enough to bring it safely to harvest. So once again we are called by Jesus to a complicated in-between. A paradox. Evil is real, noxious, and among us, and our response to evil must include both acknowledgment and restraint. If this ambiguity worries you, then remember that we are held and braced by a God who is too big for thin, one-dimensional truths — and this is a good thing. It's not that we hold paradox; it's that paradox holds us. We are held in a deep place. An ample place. A generous, sufficient, and roomy place. Though we might fear paradox, God does not, and it is in God's soil that we are

firmly planted. We're safe, even in the contradictions. Messy and weedy for sure, but safe."² Amen.

² Debie Thomas, "Let Them Grow Together," July 12, 2020, *Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church, Since 2004*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>