

Pentecost VII

Gen. 28:10-19a”

Rom. 8:12-25

Mt. 13:24-30.36-43

St. Mary the Virgin

July 23, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Paula D. Nesbitt

“Let them both grow together until the harvest.” Amen.

Let them both grow together, the good and the bad. This morning we hear the second of three parables about seeds and the spiritual life. Last week, The Rev. Canon Hugh Shilson-Thomas preached about the spiritual seed that struggles to grow in rocky ground, pointing out that the rocks and impediments of our lives bring about a distinctive strength to our spirituality.

Today, we confront the seeds of good and evil. We are cautioned to let them both grow together. Not unlike the rocky ground, growing in this way offers a strength. When we are confronted with what we believe to be utterly wrong, or perhaps evil, our faith is both challenged and strengthened in a way that otherwise wouldn't occur if we were living in a bliss-filled world.

In this morning's parable of the wheat field, our English translation softens the stark contrast of good and evil that Jesus had intended. Scholars have suggested that this parable may have been referring to a particular type of weed, namely the toxic plant darnel, which looks much like wheat. Only at harvest can one see the difference: the ears of wheat would droop when ripe while the darnel remains upright. Moreover, darnel's roots would interlock tightly with the wheat so that pulling out one would also remove the other.¹

The parable's interlocking roots of wheat and darnel suggest that perhaps good and evil are more tightly interconnected than we might think--dialectically, like two sides of a coin. We can't get rid of evil by trying to destroy it. We can and should act to empower what is good, but we are not capable of eliminating the evil impulse altogether. As the parable explains, that rests with God.

“Let them grow together,” however, doesn't mean ignoring injustice or oppression. As in a field or garden, any entity that seeks to choke out another needs to have stakes or boundaries, or be pruned, so that all have the opportunity to mature and flourish. Behavior may need to be controlled, sometimes strictly, in that process. But as earthly stewards of God's creation, we need to recognize that the accuracy of our judgments, and what is worthy of life or not, is at best only partial or provisional.

The explanation given to this parable at the end of the passage is thought to have been added by the early church, to help it cope with bitter infighting among Christians in the community out of which this gospel came. Some scholars have described the explanation as addressing a desire by some to purge the community of unfaithful members² or those who held differing views. Many people in biblical times tended toward a dualistic worldview where sharp boundaries separated good from evil, ritual purity

¹ Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43,” Working Preacher, Luther Seminary.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=979

² Sherman E. Johnson, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” *The Interpreter's Bible*, G. Buttrick ed., vol. 7. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, p.415.

from pollution, order from chaos; the tendency would be either to dissociate from all considered unclean, including unbelief, or try to uproot and cast it out.

Overzealousness or obsession with purity and conformity can lead to extremism, uprooting good spiritual seed and limiting the potential for growth and transformation of the community as the body of Christ in the world. When we think rigidly in dualistic (either-or) terms, we risk forgetting the wide array of complexity that may be present in a situation, and the limitation of our own ability to understand fully.

The story of Jacob offers an example of the complexity of dealing with good and evil. In last week's reading, Jacob had offered his hungry brother Esau a meal, for a price—the price of his birthright. Prior to the passage this morning, Jacob and his mother had conspired to trick his blind and elderly father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the blessing that had been intended for his older brother, Esau. Their plot was successful. We now meet Jacob who had set forth on a long journey, partly to flee the wrath of his brother and partly to seek a wife from his mother's kin. At night, God breaks into his sleep, showing him in a dream the gate of heaven and bestowing upon him a blessing similar to that given to Abraham and Isaac, including the assurance that God would be Jacob's constant companion. If we let ourselves slip into the type of thinking that the parable urges us to avoid, how do we understand a God who not only does not punish Jacob's bad behavior but also who bestows a blessing on him?

Clearly, God's understanding of good, evil, and justice is grounded in a larger reality than our own. Jacob hadn't earned a visitation from God or a blessing based on his bad behavior. Perhaps God had sensed something buried deep within Jacob that could be spiritually awakened, and may have hoped that Jacob would respond accordingly. Jacob's feeling of both awe and fear as he awoke³ suggests that God's presence and direct blessing had an effect, calling Jacob to face his past behavior. With the mantle he had been given along with God's companionship, Jacob could no longer live only for his own self-interest; he was called upon to become an agent of God's blessing for others across future generations. Jacob leaves transformed and, in the verses that follow, commits himself to God.⁴ Yet Jacob eventually would be tricked, just as he had tricked others, suggesting that justice has not been lost along the way.

The story of the Apostle Paul is another example of how God is capable of reaching out during times of bad behavior. Paul had been persecuting Christians when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. In this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul states, "For in hope we were saved." It wasn't Paul's hope or Jacob's hope at the time of their encounters; rather, it was God's hope that they—and we—might respond, allowing our hearts to be transformed by encountering the ultimate spiritual reality that is God.

Paul too, struggled to balance the spiritual life with human embodiedness, recognizing that one cannot be split from the other until the harvest. But he urged that by living and acting out of our spiritual values we become strengthened to resist destructive impulses that arise from our embodiedness in the world. His words also offer insight into how—personally, as a community, and as a society—we can withstand the toxicity of the evil in our midst. By living out of our spiritual values, we can find the strength to be an influence for the good.

³ Walter Russell Bowie, "Genesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, G. Buttrick ed., vol. 1. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, pp. 690-91.

⁴ Juliana Claassens, "Commentary on Genesis 28:10-19s," Working Preacher, Luther Seminary. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=968

Years ago, I was involved in a young adult ministry for those who had been through some very rough times in their lives. One participant, I'll call Sara, had been through two divorces by age 24, and had fought addiction for years. Together with a community of others who had also been through their own difficult journeys, they bonded with a shared hope that they might be a healing presence for others—the body of Christ in the world. Encountering the spiritual life through this community, Sara slowly began to let go of the distrust and cynicism that had helped her survive until then. She gained a new sense of hope—that someday she would be spiritually strong and grounded enough to help others who were caught in a toxic lifestyle, as she once had been.

All three scripture passages call us into a new way of relational thinking, one that more closely reflects God's understanding of human potential and companionship. In God's time, evil is not destroyed; instead it becomes transformed through the flourishing of goodness, whose roots are nourished in divine love, and our love. According to the Hasidic Jewish master Levi Yitzhak, when we perform a mitzvah (a commandment, or good deed), we contribute to the repair of the cosmos, just as when we violate God's will we damage the cosmos. God therefore is affected by our choices and actions⁵ because God has chosen to be in close relationship with us.

God's ability to approach us wherever we are, including our worst moments, represents a hope that arises amid the many complexities and conflicting parts of our lives. Jacob, Paul, or Sara could have been considered "bad seed" at certain points of their lives. But they responded to God's spiritual invitation and were transformed. Perhaps we too have acted a little "weedy" at one time or another. We too are transformable by God if we choose to respond. As Anglican bishop Kenneth Kirk once remarked, when our character becomes transformed, we too become a part of the manifestation of God's divine nature.⁶

⁵ Rabbi Shai Held, "The Ladder to Heaven," *BeliefNet*. <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2000/12/The-Ladder-To-Heaven.aspx>.

⁶ K.E. Kirk. *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937, p. 213, cited in Gerald R. Cragg, "The Epistle to the Romans," *The Interpreter's Bible*, G. Buttrick, ed, vol. 9. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, pp.523-24.