

Hespeler, 19 July 2020 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 44:6-8, Psalm 86:11-17, Romans 8:12-25, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Many years ago, I was called on to do a funeral. The family really only had a slight connection to the church where I was ministering, but they were hurting and grieving and I wanted to be able to do my very best for them – to say something that would give them comfort. But finding those words was not necessarily going to be easy.

You see, this was the situation. The person who had died was a beloved daughter, sister and aunt. She had died far too young and she had struggled. She had struggled, specifically, with alcoholism. She knew it was a problem. She knew that it caused no end of problems for the people who loved her. She knew she needed to stop drinking and she had tried – oh how hard she had tried! But she never succeeded for anything longer than a short season. We were gathering for her funeral because she had finally drunk herself to death.

And what do you say? What can you possibly say under those kinds of circumstances that will be of any help? I didn't have a clue, but I did have a resource. I turned, as I always do, to the scriptures for help. I often turn first, when I am in need, to the parables of Jesus – they just seem to be able to speak so powerfully to a surprising array of circumstances. And something drew my heart to the particular parable that we read this morning from the Gospel of Matthew: The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds.

Now, you might think at first glance that this parable really doesn't have anything helpful to say about a woman who has drunk herself to death because, of course, the Gospel gives us an interpretation of this parable – an interpretation that declares that it is all about judgement and the end of the world and people burning up forever and ever. I am not personally inclined to preach about such things at any funeral, and I especially wasn't at this one. But you need to know something about interpreting the parables of Jesus. One interpretation may be given to us in the Gospel of Matthew and it is a good and true one, but the power of a parable of Jesus is quite limitless. If you come to a parable with a need, I believe that Jesus can and does meet you in that need.

So, as I came to this parable in my need, I believe that Jesus spoke to me through it. He showed me that this poor too-young woman, like the field in the story, had been founded in so much good. She was loved. She was smart. She had so much potential. And, what's more, so much of that goodness had stayed with her throughout



her troubled life. Her family still loved her – they had put up with a lot, but they still loved her. And she had touched the lives of her friends and family in some very meaningful and sustaining ways.

And yet, despite all of that, a great deal of evil had crept into her life. Most of it had come in the form of addiction and of the side effects of addiction. Her life was like a field that had been sown with good seed but that had become overrun with weeds. And I know where we like to get hung up at this point of the story. We want to know where that evil came from. Was it all on her and her responsibility for the choices that she made? Or was this actually an evil that came upon her from outside of her? As we might ask it today, is alcoholism a disease or is it simply the result of bad moral choices? Alcoholism is a disease, and yet, it is one that is often driven by our choices. The question doesn't have a simple answer.

And isn't it interesting that the parable of Jesus gets hung up over that very point as well? When the weeds first show up in the garden, the slaves ask that very question. **“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?”** Now I've always figured that this was an odd question because I've got to tell you something: I've planted many seeds in many gardens in my life. Every single time I've done so, I've had weeds come up. I've never thought to ask where weeds came from. I've always just figured that weeds were something that just happened when you planted something.

But the master operates under a different theory. He apparently has absolutely no doubt when he blames all of the weeds on an external enemy: **“He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’”** So there is some strange debate in this parable about the origin of evil in the world and in the lives of people like that woman who had died. But, and this is the really important point, the point of the parable is not to argue over where the evil comes from in this world. The point is to talk about what we do with this evil and what its ultimate fate is.

Here is the plan that the master comes up with for dealing with the weeds. **“The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest.’”** Now, as I sat there preparing for that particular funeral and reflecting on that poor woman's life, the meaning of that part of the parable was only too clear to me.

As the beloved friends and family of that woman sat there in that funeral, they knew only too well what it was to see a mix of weeds and wheat in somebody's life. To be with her, to have her in their lives, meant that they had had to put up with a whole lot of bad things. They had had to put up with benders, with drunken fights, with bailing her out of jail or

visiting her in hospital. They had to put up with crushing disappointment again and again.

And yet they didn't *have* to put up with any of it, did they? They could have gotten all of those weeds out of their lives by simply kicking her out of their lives. But not one of them ever considered doing so because that would have meant losing all of the good times and the love and the really wonderful memories that they had shared with her. Despite all the problems, they loved her and she loved them and they would not have given that up. Oh, they knew exactly what the master was talking about when he said that you had to let the wheat and the weeds grow side by side.

And then we get to the punchline of the parable. What happens at the end? What happens when the weeds in her life finally lead to her drinking herself to death and the family comes together to mourn that passing? What happens at harvest time? **“At harvest time,”** says the master, **“I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”**

That I also believe they understood. They knew that the weeds of her life had been hard on her and on all of them, but that was all done now. It was over and it would all be burned away. But the good stuff – the wheat – the happy memories, the shared laughter, the times when she had been there for them and they for her – those were treasures that would be stored up forever and ever like so much wheat gathered and stored up in barns.

And that was it, that was the message that I received in my particular need to say something uplifting in a very difficult circumstance. God showed me how that parable was really spoken for that woman and her family to teach me something about the grace of God. It spoke to me about her life and its value more than it did about her death and her place in the afterlife – other, I suppose, than to say that she was now in the hands of a God who probably understood what she had struggled with far better than any of us. I honestly believe that none of us could possibly ever be in better hands beyond the grave. But, as you can no doubt see as I recount the story now, the lesson of that parable has remained with me and continues to speak to me.

And I'm going to tell you something. Whenever, in the garden of this world, I see weeds coming up in situations where we all thought that only wheat had been sown, you can bet that I return to this parable in my heart. I don't just apply it individuals who have lived troubled lives, but to larger developments as well. When, for example, a deadly pandemic shows up and disturbs everything we had taken for granted about this world, I come back to this parable. I don't spend a lot of time arguing with myself or with others over the origin of the badness that is in the pandemic – whether it was sown among us by some nameless enemy or whether it is just a product of natural functions. I just recognize that it's here – that the weeds have grown up

among the wheat. And, yes, that does mean that, for now, we are going to be experiencing a lot of really bad stuff like limitations on gatherings and people getting sick and some people dying. But that doesn't mean that there aren't some good crops growing at a time like this as we are forced to look at life in new ways, to recognize the value of people, like essential workers, that we have neglected, as we experience creativity and possibilities we never dreamed of before. Some good things will come of this, and I know that that doesn't make covid-19 worthwhile. But it does mean that sometimes you can't uproot the one and still keep the other.

Or think of some of the other terrible things that we have seen recently – George Floyd dying on the ground with a policeman's knee on his neck in Minneapolis, a young indigenous woman, Chantel Moore, shot to death during what was supposed to have been a wellness check, people upset and protesting on the streets with the occasional predictable side effect of rioting, looting and violent reactions from the police. It is all bad stuff, the evil of this world at its worse. These are weeds, honestly, that have been there in our society for a long time but, in recent days, we have noticed them much more clearly growing up among the wheat that we thought we had planted in our society.

And, once again, we could get caught up in a discussion about where these weeds come from and who planted them among us. I could probably name a few enemies, both human and supernatural, who have sown such weeds. But, rather than arguing on the sources, we ought to put our energy into figuring out what to do about the weeds. And I am very sure that we will find that there will be a great deal of trouble pulling out those particular weeds without disturbing a lot that is really good in our society. We may have to put up with some disquiet and unrest for a while but, if we do so and if we work on it, I really do believe that we can create a better harvest in this world and a harvest in which more people will feel that they have a part.

When I got the call to do that funeral so many years ago, I knew it would not be an easy task to figure out what to say. But I will never regret agreeing to do that service because, in that work, God spoke to me in a pretty powerful way and gave me a message that I keep with me and that comforts me and gives me peace as I deal with some of the very difficult events of life in this world. I will be forever grateful to that woman who lived a very troubled life and yet who taught me something vital about the kingdom of God. That was the good harvest that I received from a difficult job that I was once given to comment on a life that was filled with weeds and with wheat.