

Pentecost 7A (7/23/2017)  
 Isaiah 44:6-8  
 Psalm 86:11-17  
 Romans 8:12-25  
**Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

*Evil is simply a reality in the world, and even the reign of God is subject to the influences that violate God's good purposes. We're awfully good at pointing out the faults of others. But Jesus removes the burden of judgment from his followers, insisting that good and evil are not so easily disentangled in the world, in the community of faith, even in the individual heart. Nevertheless, he promises that God will separate good from evil in God's own time, overcoming all that stifles our flourishing.*

The Westboro Baptist Church planned a protest at the national convention of the Women of the ELCA in Minneapolis last week. The protest was announced with all the fiery rhetoric for which the group is known:

WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH TO PUBLICLY PROTEST AGAINST LUTHERAN LIARS IN MINNEAPOLIS, MN ON THURSDAY, JULY 13: ...The God Hates Your Idols Preaching Tour plans several stops in Minneapolis, MN. ... The ELCA is one of many heads of... False Religion... Jesus Christ will return to take vengeance and destroy the various hydralike heads of fake christianity [sic]. They use the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, but promote the audaciously depraved sins He abominates. ... Your ruling women, or WELCA, cause you to err, destroying your paths....

I've omitted the most hostile and discriminatory language. This was one of many stops on Westboro's itinerary, so Lutherans shouldn't feel singled out. But their presence at an ELCA event highlights the sharp contrast between their understanding of discipleship and ours. *What's eating them?* you might wonder.

**How has this group of self-proclaimed Christians become so preoccupied with condemnation?**

The Westboro Baptist church is, of course, an extreme case. They are a miniscule splinter sect widely denounced by Baptists specifically and Christians in

general. And they are notorious for their obsession with God's vengeance. Yet, they are not alone in their approach to difference. In order to demonstrate their own righteousness, they vociferously condemn all that deviates from true faith in their eyes. According to this approach, intolerance is, in fact, prophetic faithfulness, calling evildoers and wayward Christians to account for our sins in order to escape the wrath of God. We might never imagine finding common ground with groups like the Westboro Baptist Church. Nevertheless, I wonder if their hate-filled crusades are just amplified examples of a more common tendency among people of faith. **Aren't we also inclined to distinguish between the faithful and the unfaithful, to drive a wedge between who's right and who's wrong?**

Notice how quickly the slaves identify the weeds among the wheat in Jesus' parable from our Gospel from Matthew today. It's the first thing they run to tell the Master as soon as the shoots begin to emerge from the ground. Calamity! Weeds are interspersed with the wheat they had so carefully sown in the field. And their gut reaction is to remove them. "Do you want us to go and gather [the weeds]?" they ask the Master. *Since we know which plants are worthless, let us go tear those usurpers from the ground and preserve the integrity of the field! We have to fix the problem, and we have to fix it now!*

If you tend a garden or a lawn, you likely have an idea of how the slaves feel about the weeds. So do the disciples. Notice that when they ask Jesus to explain the parable, they call it "the parable of the weeds in the field." No mention of the enemy,

or the good seed, or even the Master. The disciples, like the slaves in the parable itself, are focused on the weeds.<sup>1</sup>

And even as this is a story for the first disciples, of course, it's also a story for us. **We're awfully good at identifying the weeds among the wheat, aren't we? We're awfully good at pointing out the faults of others. And, wouldn't the church be better off if only we could remove *that* kind of theology, *that* kind of doctrine, *that* kind of religious expression? Wouldn't the world be better off if only we could remove all that's wrong with it, according to our judgment?**

Jesus' parable would have us think again. *Shouldn't* we identify and eradicate the unwelcome plants? "No," replies the Master, "for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest...." Rushing in to purge the weeds would harm the whole field. Instead, the Master insists, "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." *Leave it to me, and I will attend to the weeds and the wheat alike in due time.*

Jesus acknowledges that evil is simply a reality in the world, and even the reign of God is subject to the influences that violate God's good purposes. His caution against uprooting the weeds, however, is not an excuse for moral apathy or conflict avoidance.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the gospel stirs us to confront abuse and injustice, and stand in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the vulnerable among us, even if it means bearing a cross.<sup>3</sup> **No, Jesus does not remove the burden of**

---

<sup>1</sup> See Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 292.

<sup>2</sup> See Talitha J. Arnold, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 264.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

**faith and sacrificial love from his followers, but rather the burden of judgment.** Good and evil are not so easily disentangled in the world, in the community of faith, even in the individual heart. So, **rather than render self-satisfied judgments in God's name, we allow God to be God, separating good from evil in God's own time.**<sup>4</sup>

Dear church, the good news is that **God gives the growth to the plants of the field, regardless of the ways we cultivate or threaten them.**<sup>5</sup> The promise to separate weeds from wheat, good from evil, is first and foremost a promise to bring about a bountiful harvest in the end. God *will* overcome all that stifles our flourishing. And, in Jesus we already see God at work to mend the world, rooting out the causes of pain and death, and inviting us into the work of tending and keeping for the sake of abundant life.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer T. Kaalund, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3350](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3350).

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:7-9.

<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 2:15.