

“Bad Seed, Indeed”
July 27, 2008

Genesis 29:15-28
Matthew 13:24-30

Why is it so easy to divide the world into “us” and “them”? Why is it so easy to see someone who is different, who doesn’t think – or, in this political season, *vote* – the way “we” do and then put that person in the “them” category? Why is it so easy to believe that if we build big enough prisons, high enough border fences, and powerful enough arsenals, we can keep ourselves and our families safe from “those” people, whoever they are?

Now, before you start telling yourself and me that you don’t play this destructive us and them game, before you start telling yourself and me that it’s only those *other* people who divide the world into us and them, let me ask you a few questions.

When was the last time you read a letter to the editor or a blog that seemed so wrong-headed, so illogical, so bizarre that you thought or even said out loud, “What is the matter with these people?” When was the last time you read or heard a condemnation of gay marriage as against God’s will and wondered how “those people” can be so narrow-minded or ignorant?

When was the last time you heard loud music in a language you couldn’t understand and saw sign after sign in a language you couldn’t read and wondered why “those people” couldn’t just go back where they came from? When was the last time you encountered people driving gas-guzzlers, maintaining large, lush lawns, and refusing to reduce, reuse, or recycle and wondered how “those people” can be so oblivious to global warming and the necessity to care for our wounded planet?

Now I realize that most of us folks in progressive Christian churches like to think that we’re beyond the us-and-them trap, that we’re more enlightened than “those people” who still divide the world into “us” and “those people,” but let’s not delude ourselves. We struggle with this, too. We can all too easily slip into being grateful that we’re open-minded – unlike those fundamentalists or evangelicals or Bible-thumpers – and wishing that there were fewer of “them” and more of “us.” Even we supposedly open-minded folks find ourselves thinking sometimes that the world would be a better place if more people lived and thought and worked like we did.

And into this church – and also into the churches where those “other,” more conservative folks congregate – along comes Jesus with the parable of the good and the bad seed, the wheat and the weeds. We could certainly hear this parable as confirmation that the world really is full of “us” (we, of course, would be the good seed that yields wheat) and “them” (that would be the bad seed that grows into weeds). But I think this parable, at least this morning in this sanctuary, is offering a very different message

The kingdom of heaven, the commonwealth of God, can be compared to someone who sowed good seed in the field, but then an enemy came and sowed bad seed – *weed* seed – among the wheat. Then, as the plants grew, both wheat and weed appeared. The landowner’s farm crew came to the landowner and asked where the weeds had come from and whether they should remove and destroy the weeds. And the landowner

replied, “No, if you pull the weeds out, you will uproot the wheat. Wait until harvest time, and then I’ll get the harvesters to deal with the weeds.”

Now, in your self-righteous moments (and don’t tell me you never have any self-righteous moments) ... better yet, let’s make that in *our* self-righteous moments, it’s oh-so-easy to take this parable as confirmation that there is good and bad seed and to conclude that “we” are the good seed, “they” (whoever they might be) are the weed seed, and God will take care of that weed seed in the end.

And, then again, in our moments of deep self-doubt, when our sense of being beloved and blessed by God seems to be a distant memory or even a delusion, it’s easy to think that we are the bad seed, planted by mistake or as a trick. It’s easy to fear that, unless we miraculously turn into wheat instead of weeds, we’ll be outside God’s love and grace for all of eternity.

But we need to take a moment and remember that we’re dealing with a parable here, and in parables the easy meaning may be the least valuable, especially when it reinforces an inflated or deflated sense of our own worth. We need to slow down and ask what meaning, what grace, what word of God may be lying beneath this parable’s surface.

The commonwealth of God can be compared to a field in which both wheat and weeds grow, nurtured by the soil, sun, and rain. The One whose field it is knows that it is not possible to destroy the weeds without damaging the wheat. The One whose field it is tells all who will listen that they – we – need not concern ourselves with eradicating what we think is the bad seed. The One whose field it is and whose son Christianity proclaims as the Prince of Peace is telling us all that when we destroy what we consider weeds – whether we call those weeds the “Axis of Evil” or “Islamofascists” or “illegal aliens” – our destructive power harms both “good” and “bad” seed. The One whose field it is is telling us that we need to realize we cannot divide the world into “good” and “bad” and then miraculously, self-righteously eradicate the “bad” without damaging the “good” beyond repair.

I think this parable is offering something more this morning. I think it is inviting us to understand that, while the field in Jesus’ parable may indeed represent the whole world and all its creatures, it may also represent our individual selves. There are, within each of us, impulses toward love and compassion and impulses toward indifference and fear of the “other.” Within each of us are seeds – you can think of them as “good” and “bad” or as “creative” and “destructive” or “life-embracing” and “life-denying” – that produce desirable and undesirable fruit.

However we name these different aspects of ourselves, I believe we can recognize that we are, each and every one of us, a mix of beauty and brokenness, open-heartedness and narrow-mindedness, hope and despair, compassion and impatience, generosity and greed. And teaching in parable, Jesus comes along and suggests that it’s not possible for us to be anything other than the mix we are. Jesus nudges us in the direction of making peace with all of who we are as human beings by accepting that we simply cannot pull out what we consider our weeds.

We can’t pick and choose among our human traits and have only the good seed and the wheat. We may be able to focus our attention and nurture on the wheat seeds, while trying not to give the weeds a whole lot of fertilizer. But if we try to rip out the parts of ourselves we wish weren’t there – our fear, our anger, our self-centeredness, our

intolerance – we’ll find that we’ve pulled up a lot more than what we were trying to get rid of. We’ll find that we’ve damaged the parts of us we’d like to keep, too.

So we can hear Jesus’ parable of the good and bad seed, the wheat and the weeds as a parable about the world at large, a parable about ourselves as individuals, or a parable about both. I think it’s about both. If we realize that our own motives are never pure, that we can never be loving and patient all the time, that we will always have some fear of the different and some desire to have more than we truly need, then we have a chance to see others in the same way. We have a chance to see other people, not as “those people” who need to shape up or be shipped out, but as folks like “us,” people who have their own fields of wheat and weeds and who, like us, may need help tending the wheat that brings life and beauty.

... Which finally gets me back to our first reading this morning, a reading from the Book of Genesis that tempted me to title my sermon “The Ick Factor.” Genesis and the lectionary bring us a brief vignette from the lives of two deceitful fellows, Jacob and his uncle Laban. Genesis and the lectionary bring us a story from a time and culture in which women were property, men had multiple wives, and, if you were a man without means, you could buy a wife with seven years of hard work. ‘Seems like we have a shole lot of weeds to contend with here!

But instead of seeing only weeds here, we’re invited through Jesus’ parable to see the characters of Jacob and Laban as people not so different from ourselves. Their weeds and the weeds of their time and place may be especially big and healthy at this point in the story, and the wheat may be struggling to get the nutrients and water it needs. But Jesus invites us to see both the weeds and the wheat, the ways in which Jacob and Laban are faithful to the God who called them into being, *and* the ways that they are *not*. And by inviting us to see that God is at work even in characters like Jacob and Laban, who seem like a couple of noxious weeds, Jesus invites us to realize that God is at work at us, no matter how weedy we may be.

Good seed and bad. Mixed motives and mixed-up lives. People who know how to love and how to hate. God takes us as we are and loves us as we sprout both wheat and weeds, and the Holy One asks us to trust that, through the mystery of grace, even our weeds belong in the commonwealth of God.

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So why *is* it so easy to divide the world into “us” and “them”? Why *is* it so easy to encounter someone who is different, who doesn’t see things the way we do, and then think of him or her as one of “them”? Anthropologists tell us that our practice of categorizing others as either one of “us” or one of “them” is a deeply-rooted feature of our survival instinct. When simply keeping ourselves and our children alive was – or *is* – a daily struggle, anything or anyone unknown and unfamiliar is a potential threat, and we need to keep our guard up and our defenses strong unless and until we have determined that the unfamiliar is not a threat. So dividing the world into “us” and “them” has been a human survival mechanism for a very long time.

But through Jesus, through love, through beauty, and through so many other channels, God is calling us to seek something much richer than simple survival. God calls us to recognize and embrace and share and celebrate the abundance of life, the never-ending surprises of our own and everyone else’s humanity. The Holy One gives us eyes to see and ears to hear the fullness of creation, not as a collection of good and bad

seeds, good and bad parts, good us and bad them, but as a glorious, mysterious, and, yes, sometimes dangerous mix of life – abundant, challenging, glorious life. And God calls us to realize that this *mix* of life is God's beloved creation.

With God's grace and blessing, may we tend that life within us and all around us, forever and ever.

Amen.

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