

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

Jesus put before the crowds 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. ²⁷The slaves of the householder came to him and said, '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, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹The householder replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest. 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.' "

³⁶Jesus then 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. ⁴²The angels 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 hear!"

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

In the first congregation I served, I happened to find a book in their library that had skits about all of Jesus' parables. The one written about today's gospel called for the stage to be empty except for a table and two chairs. Then enter the last two members of First Lutheran Church. They about to have their final congregational meeting to decide which one of them would be the very last member of this church. They had already gotten rid of all of the "sinners," and each had determined that the other one was one of "them." And so it goes. Such is our nature.

In the parable in today's gospel reading, the slaves notice that someone has sown seeds of a particular kind of weed alongside of the wheat. These weeds that were growing

in the field are dandelion, which is almost identical to wheat until the grain begins to appear. It is, in large enough quantities, poisonous. The impulse to pull up all of the dandelion is an understandable one but also foolhardy. In doing this much of the wheat itself would be pulled up, as the parable says. Let them grow together, the farmer says. We'll sort it out in the harvest.

In the explanation of this parable we are told that it is the angels who will sort them out in the end times. In other words, the weeds stay where they are for as long as we live; the sorting will come at the end of time and we won't be doing the sorting. So, what do we do in the meantime?

First, it might be good to consider that each of us is a field in which both the wheat and weeds grow. Each of us has qualities of healthy, wholesome grain AND noxious weeds. Week by week we rehearse this fact at the beginning of our worship. "We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves."

And yet, we all love to find others who are "them." Listen to how we talk, "Well, I'm not the world's best father, but *this* guy really takes the cake."

A number of years ago I knew a pastor in the Worldwide Church of God. Their theology was basically that they were the only ones getting it right and everyone else was going to hell. There was a huge reformation movement in this denomination a while back and the reformed part of the church got to keep the original name. If this pastor is at all representative of his denomination, they are an exceedingly ecumenical church. For instance, this pastor and his very white, suburban church merged with a black Pentecostal church a while back...and the Worldwide Church of God is NOT Pentecostal.

As you can imagine, going through that kind of doctrinal and ecclesiastical shift caused quite a bit of conflict in this denomination, including this pastor's church. He said the most difficult thing for his people to come to terms with was that they were no longer "special." They used to be the chosen few who made the grade; now everyone is getting in.

It's like an old saying, attributed to various people: It's not enough merely to win; others must lose.

There is an odd story in Numbers that Jesus references when Nicodemus comes to visit him at night. He says, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." In the account given in Numbers that Jesus references, the people of Israel had been complaining about how hard life was since they left Egypt (forgetting how awful it was being slaves), saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

It's like the joke about the two women who tried out a new restaurant. Afterwards, one of them said, "That food was simply awful, it was the worst meal I've ever had in my life." And the other woman says, "Oh yes! And such small portions too!"

Although the people had complained many times before about how awful it was being in the wilderness and that maybe slavery wasn't all that bad after all, this time it apparently got to God. So he sends poisonous snakes (fiery serpents!) into the camp. They bit people and many of them died. Let me tell you, there's nothing quite like an infestation of fiery serpents sent by God to get their attention and to bring a people to repentance. So, they beg Moses to go into the tabernacle and ask God to take them away. Which God *does not do!* Instead, he instructs Moses to make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole; that way when the people got bit by these poisonous snakes, they didn't need to die; instead, they could look up at the bronze image of what bit them and live. Which has got to be the worst solution to a problem ever. What would be the acceptable number of poisonous snakes in your house? That's right. Zero. Zip. Nada.

But God says that the snakes stay, you just don't have to die. And Jesus says that he's like that serpent that was lifted up. He's the image of this sin and by gazing upon the image of sin (and its consequences) you won't perish. But the snakes stay, and so does the sin. The only conclusion I have ever been able to come up with for this horrible "solution" to the problem of fiery serpents and sin is because without the struggle against sin – within us and without – we would have no need for a savior, we would not seek God or Christ Jesus.

Right after 9-11, George W. gave a speech in which he said that we would, "Rid the world of evildoers." And I remember thinking to myself, "Good luck with that!"

Richard Swanson, professor of religion at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, in writing about today's gospel reading, points out something about human nature. He writes:

There is something in us that loves to scold other people. People on the Left scold people on the Right. People on the Right ridicule the "snowflakes" on the Left. People who drive a Prius (as I do) make fun of people who drive big-butt trucks capable of towing a combine even though they live in the suburbs. People who drive big-butt trucks snicker at the idea that saving fuel is all that important. Vegans are appalled at the compromises made by occasional vegetarians, who look down their noses at carnivores, who remind everyone who will listen that "the West wasn't won on salad," whatever that is supposed to mean.

He continues later in his article:

This parable provides an occasion to reflect on how we seem to need to be angry with each other. And the parable (angry as it is) provides also a suggestion: when

the slaves ask for permission to go out and rip out everything that looks like a weed, the farmer tells them not to be stupid. Ripping up weeds will also rip up crops. He's right: rash anger never makes things better. Even when Jesus seems to encourage it.

It is for the sake of the wheat that the farmer tells the slaves to NOT rip out all the weeds. We just seem to be stuck with them, and sometimes we *are* them. This is a parable both realistic and filled with judgment. It's realistic in that we will never "rid the world of evil-doers"; it is judgmental in its final verdict that those weeds are really gonna get it when Jesus returns.

But maybe it's not that simple. Maybe there's something we're missing. And this might be it.

When Jesus gathers the 11 (minus Judas) at the very end of Matthew's gospel, we are told that, "When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted." The only other time that this Greek word appears in Matthew's gospel is when Peter is walking on the water and he begins to sink. Once he's safely in the boat, Jesus asked him why he doubted. Apparently, before the resurrection Jesus had trouble with this and felt that he needed to call Peter out on it.

But after the resurrection we are clearly told that some of the disciples doubted (using the very same word Jesus used when confronting Peter) while the others worshipped him, and it doesn't seem to faze him at all. He simply commissions them to make disciples of all nations. The implications of this are not at all clear, but given that the Jesus portrayed in Matthew is the judgiest of all the gospels before the resurrection, doubting disciples standing before him right before he was to leave them seems like it would have at least warranted a passing comment. But we get nothing from Jesus. They are commissioned right along with the ones who worshipped him. Perhaps his resurrection changed him. As Richard Swanson puts it,

At the end of the parable, the weed-people are separated out and burned. At the end of Matthew's gospel, there are people who see Jesus raised from the dead, but still doubt (a weedy behavior in Matthew's story up to that point). But at the end of Matthew's gospel the weed-people who doubt are not gathered and burned, they are sent out to baptize and teach.

Whatever the case may be at the end of time, we know that we are stuck with the weeds, the bad seeds, and that sometimes that's us as well. And while we certainly do not turn a blind eye to sinful, destructive behavior – we are called to advocate for the weak and oppressed, after all – maybe we could be a little less judgy with those who differ from us. Perhaps we could begin to understand that we are all in this together: there truly is no

“other,” no “them.” It’s all us. Jesus is going to sort it out in the end. In the meantime, let us love one another as Christ as loved us, not holding our sin against us calling us to repentance and making us new. As Luther put it in his explanation of Baptism in the Small Catechism:

What then is the significance of such a baptism with water?

It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Maybe we need to spend more time singing the songs of the surpassing love of God who did not withhold even his own son, but gave him up for us all. And in doing this amazing thing, will he not with him give us everything else? Including the love and fortitude to both fight against sin and its fruits AND to bear with all of the sinners – including ourselves – until Christ returns to sort things out in the end.

Just this morning I came across something on Facebook that I had to share. While I may quibble over a couple of theological suppositions, I could not agree more with the course of action taken. Here is the story shared by Levi Smith:

I was rude to someone today.

We are on vacation out of state this week in North Carolina. I walked into our usual donut joint with my mask on. The owner walked up to me and started taking our order. In retrospect, I should have given more attention to her weary countenance.

I took one side of my mask off so I could continue my order without being muffled. Without hesitation, she said, “Sir, please put your mask on.”

My flesh convinced me that this was the time for me to be a patriot. I put the mask loop over my ear and told her that we wouldn’t be needing any donuts after all. She seemed to shrug my response off, so I continued. I didn’t yell. I didn’t make a scene. But I looked at her straight in the face and told her she was rude. We exchanged pleasantries, and I left.

2 miles down the road, the Holy Spirit smote my heart. I stood for my personal belief while ignoring humility and grace.

I turned the van around and drove back to the donut shop. I entered the shop, and the same woman was standing there. I walked right up to her, with my mask on, looked her in the eye and said,...

"I. Am. Sorry."

With workers and other customers looking on, I asked for her forgiveness and told her I should have been more gracious and humble. She opened up to me for a few minutes about how tough the current situation was on her as a former nurse and current small business owner. She was tired. She was weary. She was worried.

She didn't need a seasonal patriot. She needed a gracious Christian.

I purchased my donuts, we laughed, and I left. When I got back to the van, I explained to my children that it was important we set ourselves aside for the wellbeing of others. I made sure my kids knew that I was willing to eat crow so a tired stranger could have an emotionally healthy day. I explained to my children what I had done and how I needed to make it better. I explained to my children that God allows us to make mistakes so His grace can be on greater display.

We will back for more donuts this week. I'll be wearing my mask the whole time, making sure I am a blessing and not a bully. And I didn't have to give up a shred of freedom or dignity to do so.

This world needs humility, grace and forgiveness. It doesn't need more casual Christians dying on their temporal hills. It needs more Jesus-followers living out the Gospel.

Yes, be a patriot. But don't let your personal beliefs drown out your faith and witness.

All we are enduring will one day fade away, but the Word of the Lord will endure forever.

In 1 Peter it is written, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." Perhaps the ones he is being patient with are us. Let us also be patient with one another as well. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Amen.