

Genesis 28:10-19a “He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.”

Romans 8:12-25 “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

Matthew 13:24-30, 26-43 “Let anyone with ears listen!”

It's All Good

O God of our suspicion and imagination, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will. Amen.

The Gospel of Matthew, as you probably know, is a literary work, and not a trip diary. (That’s true for all of the Gospels.) Written toward the end of the first century, at least 50 years after the death of Jesus, Matthew set out to demonstrate what a good teacher Jesus was. Matthew’s project (as far as I can tell) was to teach people what Jesus had taught. In Matthew’s Gospel, the body of Jesus’ teaching is laid out in five major courses of instruction. The first course is Jesus’ teaching on how to begin right now to live into God’s realm, which Matthew refers to as “the kingdom of heaven.” The second is about how to bring healing and restoration to an aching world. The third course is a collection of parables which make clear that Jesus’ followers have what they need to understand God’s realm. The fourth contains instructions on how to get along in community with an ethic of humility and radical forgiveness. And the fifth course is Jesus’ teaching about the end times – the end of life as we know it.

Matthew is actually quite taken with the idea that one of these days, God is going to do a reckoning, a judging to determine, once and for all, what is what. It’s always worth remembering that when folks are hoping for such a reckoning, it’s because they are suffering and they can see that others are thriving at their expense. They are looking forward to the day when God sets things right.

There aren’t any parables in Matthew before the third course (which is the thirteenth chapter) and when the parables start, there are eight right in a row -- eight parables in a row that remind Jesus followers that they already have what they need to understand the kingdom of heaven, which is at hand. The implication then is that they’ve been feeling threatened and confused – perhaps charged with not understanding anything. Last week we heard the first in the series: the parable of the sower who scattered seeds willy nilly all over the path, the rocks, in the thorny places, and in the good soil which produced varying yields from thirty fold to sixty fold to a hundred fold. One parishioner told me last week that he wished the story explicitly included yields of five fold and ten fold. I hear this parable of the sower as a teaching about the extravagance with which the Word (the seed) goes out and the observation that it doesn’t grow everywhere. It just doesn’t. But when it does, it produces a tremendous yield.

Then there are the parables of the weeds, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the fishing net that catches all kinds of fish, and the old and the new treasure. The conclusion of this set of lessons is that many people in Jesus’ hometown took offense and his power was extremely limited because of that. That’s how we know that these are not happy little Sunday School teachings about what it will be like in heaven. These are the kinds of teachings that are so offensive that word spreads to Herod that people think that wild-eyed John the Baptist must have been raised from the dead. That’s how we know that these are hard hitting prophetic teachings.

So why were these teachings offensive? First of all, I will tell you that I have an advanced degree in theology; I spend a lot of time thinking about this; and I do not know. The best I can manage is to suspect and to imagine. What I suspect is that Jesus was teaching things about God that were scandalous. What I imagine is that Jesus was teaching things about God that sounded like an indictment of people with wealth and power. What I suspect is that Jesus was overextending the invitation to the kingdom. What I imagine is that Jesus was teaching things about God that sounded threatening to people who aspired to be people with wealth and power – you know, law-abiding citizens (or aspiring citizens) who worked hard and earned what they had. I also suspect that Jesus was a very funny man, but his jokes were the funniest to people who did not have enough to eat and had nothing left to lose, and the rest of us either find them not funny at all, or we just don't get them.

The clue to me that the parable of the weeds is teaching something funny and subversive is in the verses which are omitted. In between the parable of the weeds and the explanation of the parable of the weeds, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to mustard seed planted in a field (which would be absurd, but was also illegal); and Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a woman mixing leaven in a huge amount of flour (which would be gross and frightening and taboo). We have domesticated those stories – but they are were not nice when Jesus taught them.

The weeds in this parable weren't any old weeds – they were zizania – or darnel – or tares. It's funny to ask who planted the weeds because no-one in their right mind would *plant* this weed. It looks like wheat until it matures – so it's hard to tell the difference. But the grain is a soporific – it makes you sleepy if you ingest it; it can cause blindness; and if you eat enough of it, it will kill you.¹ Furthermore, it was a symbol of fornication.² It's clearly not just a nuisance – it's poison to the community. But the way you deal with it is, you do nothing until it's harvest time – because in trying to tell the difference before that, you risk ruining the wheat to get rid of the tares. That's how it is, living in the realm of God, Jesus is saying. There are plenty of weeds that start out looking like good plants. You can't tell, so you shouldn't try to decide what should be allowed to grow. Leave it to the angels of the Lord to sort it out in the end.

So what about this sorting? Is there any Good News here for us? (I suspect and imagine that there is.) You know, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once said, "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains ... an un-uprooted small corner of evil."³ And this, for me, is an interpretive key.

What if we understand the kingdom of heaven this way: within each one of us and within our community, good seeds and bad seeds have been sown and are growing? The kingdom of heaven – the realm of God is very near – is right here (and right here and also out there – and I don't just mean Newbury Street). Does this offend you? Were you hoping for better? (I was. There *is* going to have to be some redistribution.) What do you know about the desire to annihilate your own weeds? What would it mean – what would it demand from you to

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) p. 34.

² Allen & Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels without Blaming the Jews* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 59.

³ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10420.Aleksandr_Solzhenitsyn

acknowledge that maybe you can't tell the difference between the good and the bad growth in yourself, much less in anyone else? Here's another question. If the enemy has planted the weeds, what would it take for you to love your enemy (which is Jesus' teaching in the first course, the Sermon on the Mount). What would it mean to care for what might be weeds and to care for and pray for the weed planter? ⁴ It would be *very* risky. Very risky indeed. But I imagine that Jesus' point was that it's actually riskier not to.

There's a Rumi poem, translated by Coleman Barks, that is called "Who makes these changes?" It goes:

Who makes these changes?
I shoot an arrow right.
It lands left.
I ride after a deer and find myself
chased by a hog.
I plot to get what I want
and end up in prison.
I dig pits to trap others
and fall in.

I should be suspicious
of what I want.⁵

You know, Matthew's community understood the love and the grace and the generosity and the wisdom of God to be constant. Matthew's community understood God's purpose to be redemption and God's way to be reconciliation. It's humans who confuse righteousness and wickedness. It's humans who are quick to respond to violence with more violence, and who project our desire for vengeance (physical or intellectual or spiritual vengeance) onto the Divine. It's a relief to imagine that God's angels can and will cull out whatever is not loving and grace-filled and generous and wise, whatever undermines the well-being of the community, and that they will bundle up the weeds and use them to fuel the fire. Once the poison gets removed, then the wheat is gathered into the barn. But it doesn't live happily ever after in storage. The wheat only gets gathered into the barns so that it can be used for food. The fire is needed to bake the bread to feed the hungry. In other words, in God's love and grace and generosity and wisdom, the weeds and the wheat are all useful – it's all good.

⁴ This is an interpretive approach developed by The Rev. Bill Dols and used in *The Bible Workbench* teaching/commentary series published by The Education Center in Charlotte, NC. See volume 18:4.

⁵ Jelaluddin Rumi, "Who Makes These Changes," in *This Longing: Poetry, Teaching Stories and Letters of Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), p. 43.