

The Wheat and the Weeds

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

FCCOE Aug 13, 2023

Pictured here is South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu who passed away in 2021. He is known for his restorative justice work during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, as a nation tried to heal after the tragic racial injustice of apartheid. He was also known for his large and welcoming smile.

Towards the end of his life Archbishop Tutu was interviewed by a young reporter, and he was smiling the entire time. The reporter started pressing Desmond on why he was so joyful. He said to him, "Look. You are dying of cancer and the country you've worked to fix is an absolute mess. Where is this optimism coming from?" So Desmond winked, tapped his clerical collar, and said "Ah, you forget. We are resurrection people."

What I want to talk about this morning is how we can be optimistic, hopeful and joyful in a world where evil is so pervasive. In other words, how to be resurrection people.

(Read Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43)

This is the parable of the weeds and the wheat. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who sows good seed in his field. While everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. This weed, in the middle east, is a noxious plant that so closely resembles wheat that you can't tell what it is until the grain appears. When the grain does appear, the weeds are for the first time revealed. When the grain started to sprout, the owner's servants recognized the problem and ask the farmer where the weeds came from. His answer is simple and spare. An enemy did this.

"Do you want us to go and pull them out?" they ask. No, he says, because if you pull out the weeds you will pull out some wheat with them. And he is right. That version of weeds had a root system that spread and intertwined more than the wheat root system, so much of the crop would be lost.

Instead, let them grow together until the harvest. I'll have my harvesters first collect the weeds and tie them into bundles to be burned, then collect the wheat into the barn.

That's the parable, and now the meaning. There are only three parables in the Bible for which Jesus explains the meaning. All of them are in Matthew 13, and this is one of them.

The farmer is Jesus. This was true 2000 years ago, it is true today, it will be true until the end of the age. The field is the entire world. In other words what He is doing is on a global scale. The seed he sows are the sons and daughters of the Kingdom of Heaven whom he spreads all throughout the world. These are the people who hear the word of God, believe it, and put it into action. They bear fruit, which we know from other scripture means concrete deeds of love, truth, justice, redemption. This was true 2000 years ago, is true today, and will be true until the end of time.

Jesus says enemy who sows the weeds is the devil. The devil sows weeds all thru the wheat. In other words the Devil is at work all over the world, everywhere where God's people are trying to live good and holy lives and do good things in their communities.

This is a clear teaching of Jesus that many people never think about. Jesus teaches that the devil is real. The devil is active, he is purposeful, he is a thinking, strategic creature who is constantly tries to lead us away from the truth and into evil. Convince us that what is wrong is right and what is right is wrong. The devil is at work all over the place. Jesus tells His disciples, then, now and until the end of time that they need to be aware of this. You have an enemy, and he's active.

You notice the devil did his work while everyone was sleeping. Evil enters our lives, our churches, our communities in quiet, clandestine ways. It comes behind our backs where we don't notice. The devil works in sneaky ways – while we are sleeping.

In the Bible sleep is often a metaphor for lack of spiritual attention. Think of the disciples falling asleep on the Mount of Transfiguration. Or falling asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus needed them the most. Think of King David in the Bathsheba incident which started when he woke up from a snooze.

Do not be spiritually inattentive, Jesus says. You have an active, sneaky enemy.

Jesus explains that the harvest is the end of the age. Harvesters are angels. Jesus will send them to “weed out of His Kingdom” all those who cause others to sin and all evildoers. There will be eternal consequences for all who choose to live evil lives. They will go to hell. Hell is eternal life apart from God and everyone who is with God in heaven. Hell is a doctrine that many people disbelieve, but it is clear in the teaching of Jesus. Six times in the Gospel of Matthew He teaches about this place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The angels will also gather everyone who have chosen to live holy lives. They will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father in heaven. They will be rewarded with eternal life with God and all the redeemed from all history.

So in the end there will be eternal consequences for everyone depending on how they choose to respond to God. There will be eternal resolution of all injustice. Evil will forever be defeated. And goodness will be eternally triumphant.

That’s the parable. That’s the explanation. So what?

1. Good and evil will always be found together. Then, now, and until the end of the age, the wheat and the weeds will grow together. Good people and evil people. And they are not all black and all white – like Mother Theresa and Charles Manson. Individuals like you and me and organizations will have a mix. But good and evil will always be together.

So expect evil and corruption in our worlds. And expect it especially where the Kingdom of God is best manifested. That has always been the case. Because the devil is the enemy of God and His people and everything good. The more the Kingdom of God is spread the more we should expect to find problems, corruption, evil. The weeds are always mixed in with the wheat.

Does this mean we are just supposed to be passive and not try to get rid of evil. No, of course not. Jesus gave us a lot of examples of delivering people from bondage and told us to pray that we’d be delivered from evil. So we do what we can. But the weeds will always be with us. Don’t be surprised.

This is one truth that young Pastors have a hard time learning. I did. In our first church we had a very difficult man who made life very difficult for Beth and me. Was he an evil Hannibal Lecter? No, but the time and emotional energy we put in trying to draw him as an ally sapped our strength, stressed our marriage, threatened to de-rail our ministry there. Only in retrospect did I realize this as a spiritual battle, directed by the devil.

2. Let me follow with my second point. Good and evil will always be found together, so don't be surprised. But second, Evil is a perversion of the good.

I believe it was Thomas Aquinas who first pointed this out, that evil is a lack of good. It is a corruption of the good. This man in our church was not an evil man. He had been a church leader there for 40 years and he loved the church - which is a good thing. But he had a vision for how that church should go and it was simply too stunted. I think the devil used him in his plan to stymie the health of the church. Again, this guy was not a bad man, and a Christian believer, but he was an unwitting instrument of the enemy.

Aquinas says, rightly so, that evil is a privation of the good. He goes further: evil is parasitic on the good. Evil attaches to the good and feeds on it, parasitically.

Think of cancer. We have a good friend who underwent cancer surgery last Tuesday. We called Monday night and prayed with her. The organ on which the cancer is growing is good, but the cancer is a corruption of good cells, and it is destructive.

Eliminating evil is delicate work because it almost always threatens the good. The good wheat can so easily be pulled up with it. The good organ can be damaged when the surgeon removes the cancer. In our last church we had a neurosurgeon named Bob Ojemann. He was one of the best at Mass General. He told me that his brain surgeries would often take 14 hours. Extracting the strands of tumor from the intricate folds of the brain was very delicate and it was always possible to do damage to healthy tissue. He told me of some cases where for some reason, some unawares slip he made, a persons eyesight was lost, or a certain part of memory never came back. Damage to the good when dealing with the bad. If we tried to remove or silence that man in our first church there would have been greater damage to the part of the body that was healthy.

Satan is crafty. We can work against evil, but do it carefully and prayerfully and know that you will always have it until the harvest at the end of the age.

I want to give you two further thoughts that come out of this passage. Both of them answer the question of why does God allow evil in the world. Then, now and forever. Why does He allow evil people, evil things, evil systems, evil actions.

Neither of my thoughts are original. The first one comes from Augustine, who said this:

3. God permits evil in order to bring out a greater good. Satan means for evil to destroy everything good, but God can use even the most terrible evil to bring out a good that would not have shown up otherwise.

Most of us know the name of Corrie ten Boom. Arrested with her sister by the Nazis where they were imprisoned in horrible conditions for no reason at all. Everyone agrees that Hitler was evil – a clear instrument of Satan. But in that horrible prison the faith and vibrancy of the sisters shined out like a lantern, even when her sister died. All around saw it and were given hope.

How about the corrupt church? We come from greater Boston where the Roman Catholic abuse scandal surfaced. Probably the most evil, destructive thing that hit the church in a long time. Tens of thousands of people left the church, parishes closed, millions of dollars spent. Can any good come out of that?

The scandal broke in St. Julia's parish in Weston MA where Fr Geohegan was exposed as a pedophile, subsequently sent to prison and killed there. That began the unravelling of numerous other cases.

A man named Mark Ward was chairman of the Parish Council at St. Julias. I've since gotten to know Mark who now lives on the Cape and is a Board member for Elevate USA. He saw the destructive evil in the church all around him and went to Cardinal O'Connor and pressed him to come up with a plan to get good priests into the churches. What they decided to do was take a little known seminary outside Boston, St. John's, and develop a national plan to develop second career priests. St. John's had never had more than a couple dozen seminarians, but the plan Ward and the Cardinal came up with was to get every parish not only in this country but overseas as well to identify men who were widowers who had once considered a call to the Priesthood or might now. They designed St. John's to serve these men, minimum age 30, and within a few years that seminary grew from 40 to 200 candidates. Rampant, destructive evil as the seedbed for hope and a future. That bright light would never have shown unless the darkness of evil first fell. Augustine was right, one reason God allows evil in this world is so that he might bring out even greater good.

My last point on why God allows evil to exist and teaches his followers to patiently coexist with evildoers is because this is how God relates to them.

4. God loves evildoers. He hates evil, and holds us accountable for the evil we choose to do, including an ultimate judgment if someone persists all their life long

in choosing to do evil. BUT, as long as they are alive on this planet, God still loves evildoers. God wants all of them to change. Convert, turn away from sin. Come to a life of love and redemption. Even up to the last minute, evildoers can be saved.

Many of you know about the non-profit I help lead in Lowell and Lawrence. Elevate New England helps urban at-risk public school students graduate and succeed in life, and many of the kids we work with come out of very rough backgrounds where evildoing is a way of life.

Rhea Gordon is our ED and my colleague, and if you come up to Lowell for a site visit and we have enough time, Rhea will drive you by the house she and Ken first bought when they moved to Lowell 30 years ago to plant a church among Cambodian immigrants. It is a bit cleaned up now, but you can still see the tough neighborhood it was in, and Rhea will have you look down the alley between the close set houses where you can get a glimpse of her former back yard. It was sunken in, triangular in shape, with about four foot high block retaining walls.

All three of her children were born while they lived there, and that was their only playground. Outside on the street was dangerous. Gangs were out there, guns and drugs. Gang members, remember, are evil only because it is a perversion of good. They join gangs because they are looking for love, family, community. Rhea's kids were not allowed on the street.

Rhea will tell you that her home and back yard were havens of peace. How she first became a foster mom is a long story, but she's had a total of 20 foster children. Kids from the street were welcomed in their home, and many of them found the love they were seeking and lives were changed. Not all, but some. Wheat and weeds, together growing on that rough street in Lowell. Lives were changed.

So that is the message, and that is the reason for the big smile on Bishop Desmond Tutu's face. We are people of the resurrection. We live, and always will live with evil. This is a call for patience and trust in God who will set it all right in the end. And give us endurance and hope that the bright light of Christ can shine and that evildoers will change their ways.