

Jim Gill

July 23, 2017

"The Crazy Gardener"

Genesis 28:10-22 Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43 Romans 8:12-25

INTRODUCTION Genesis 28:10-19a

In the verses just prior to ones I am about to read, we are told that Esau marries the daughter of Ishmael, the first son of Abraham born to Hagar, the Egyptian servant of Sarah, Abraham's wife. This was in addition to the wives he already had. Not only did Jacob's older brother not care for his birthright, giving it away for a bowl of beans, he marries the daughter of the son that Abraham wasn't supposed to have. NOW we know why Jacob is to be the line through which the Nation of Israel will come.

This morning we read about Jacob taking flight after having tricked his brother Esau into giving him the inheritance in exchange for a mess of pottage. As Jacob leaves to go to find a wife from his Uncle Laban, the brother of his mother Rebekah, he has a dream. Hear the word of God from Genesis 28:10-22

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 13:24-30; 36-43

This morning we come to another agricultural parable of Jesus. This week, Jesus teaches about the mystery of the existence of evil in our world. This is another parable that the disciples asked for an explanation. Hear the word of God from Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43.

Let us pray. Open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our souls to sense your touch. Open our hearts to feel your love. Open our minds to receive your word.

The kingdom of heaven is like a programmer who started many processes on her computer. While everyone was sleeping, a hacker broke in and started some counterfeit jobs, which began using some of the CPU time. The operators said, "Didn't you start useful jobs on the computer? Where then did these counterfeits come from?" "A hacker did this," she replied. The operators asked her, "Do you want us to kill the jobs?" "No," she answered, "because while you are killing them, some good processes might be interrupted by accident. Let them all go to completion. Then we will purge every counterfeit process from the disk and memory, and save the results of every good process onto permanent storage."

(A friend helped me with this because I know as much about computer programming as I do about farming.)

Last week we heard Jesus parable about a crazy sower who sowed seeds everywhere- on the hardened path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good ground. This week we're talking about pulling weeds ... or actually not pulling weeds. Every gardener knows that planting seeds is the easy part of having a successful garden. It is much more time consuming to weed that same garden. It's hard work. As someone has said, "When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant." There is a corollary to that truth: "To distinguish flowers from weeds, simply pull up everything. What grows back ...are weeds." Weeds seem to plant themselves or indeed, maybe it really is like Jesus said, they are planted by THE ENEMY... THE ... DEVIL!!!!!!

One of my favorite stories is about the author Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He wrote about a colleague who thought it very unfair to influence a child's mind by inculcating any opinions before it had come to years of discretion to choose for itself. Coleridge took his colleague out to his garden and told him it was his botanical garden. "How so? It is covered with weeds." Coleridge replied, "Oh, that is only because it has not yet come to its age of discretion and choice. The weeds, you see, have taken the liberty to grow, and I thought it unfair in me to prejudice the soil towards roses and strawberries."

Jesus uses similar imagery to explain the presence of evil in our world. He talks about a farmer who planted good wheat seed in a field. Unlike the parable of the crazy sower we looked at last week, this is one deliberate sower. This farmer is deliberate and careful and determined to do everything he can to make sure he will have a good crop. He planted his wheat in nothing BUT good ground. But under cover of night, an enemy came and planted weeds. Now here's where Jesus' audience could identify. They must have thought, "That's one evil sower!"

The meaning of Jesus' parable about the wheat and the weeds becomes clearer when we look at the specific kind of weed Jesus is talking about. Other translations call the weeds "Tares." Their official name is the "Lolium temulentum." It is a species of rye-grass, the seeds of which are a strong soporific poison. In its early stages it looked just like the wheat. It was only after both had "headed out" or produced seeds up top that one could tell the difference between the two by their color. The problem with taking a hoe to the evil weeds of the world is that good and evil sometimes look so much alike.

In Jesus' parable, the farm hands came to the owner and asked, "Do you want us to pull the weeds?" "No," said the owner. "If you try, you might damage the grain in the process. Let the weeds alone. At harvest time we will separate the two. Let good and bad grow together."

Parables are not meant to pat us on the back, but to give us a kick in the pants. They are not intended to comfort us, but to challenge us and change us. Parables speak out against the status quo. Parables are demonstrators waving

signs of protest, speaking out against our ways of thinking, sometimes even our traditional ways of experiencing and obeying God. Unlike most of Jesus parables that have one main point, this one has four.

First, we have an enemy and that enemy is real. In verse 39 Jesus tells us plainly that the enemy is the devil. Surely we know that there is no creature with horns a tail and a pitchfork. That imagery comes more from Milton's Paradise Lost than from the Bible. But the Bible, and in this case Jesus himself, declares that there is an intelligent, active spiritual presence in this world that is opposing God and actively sowing weeds.

The second truth declared is that God is patient.. God is amazingly patient with us sinners. Listen to this word from II Peter 3:9: "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." God doesn't want anyone to be separated. And God gives to most people many chances to repent of sin and claim Jesus Christ as Lord.

Third, it is God who judges in the end not us. No person is authorized to compose a list of those who are in and those who are out. If you remember the Crusades from your history lessons it was one of the most awful times when Christians went to war in the name of Christ. In one of the first crusades, Christian knights from Western Europe blew through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land and killed everyone in sight.

It was not until later, when they turned the bodies over; that they found crosses around most of their victim's necks. It never occurred to them that Christians could have brown skin as well as white ¹ Judging who is fit and who isn't is not our call. For us to do so is not only be judgmental but also presumptuous on our part. It also presumes that all weeds are destined to stay that way. It disallows for the possibility of transformation. What does our Mission Statement say? We are to be about "Changing Lives and Growing Disciples THROUGH the Transforming Love of Jesus Christ!"

The fourth thing this parable teaches us is the fact that judgment is coming. The doctrines of a final judgment and an eternal heaven and hell are hard doctrines. But without them, God's justice and hatred of sin are compromised, and our freedom of choice is denied. Real love forces choices between good and bad. Real love is a spouse saying to an alcoholic spouse "I want you to choose between the bottle and me. I will not coddle that liquor which threatens to kill you." Real love challenges those who drink and drive and text and drive to stop. Real love challenges those who haven't darkened the door of a church in a long time to give God's family another try. Real love challenges idolatry and bigotry and hatred and greed. Real love reaches out to those in need no matter what side of what border they are. Real love is patient and persevering.

Like I pointed out last week, there once was a Pharisee named Saul who was a weed. He was bad. He held the coats of those who stoned Stephen so they could get a better wind up so they could throw harder. He imprisoned followers of Jesus. But then, Saul met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul the weed became Paul the wheat. What would have happened to the Christian Church if Saul had been pulled up before he met the risen Jesus?

Transforming lives is something that God specializes in doing.. We have all heard of the Italian violin maker, Stradivarius. His violins are now the most prized violins ever made because of the rich and resonating sound they produce. The unique sound of a Stradivarius violin cannot be duplicated. Now what may surprise you is these precious instruments were not made from treasured pieces of wood; they were carved from discarded lumber. Stradivarius was very poor, and could not afford fine materials like his contemporaries. So he got most of his wood from the dirty harbors where he lived. He would take those waterlogged pieces of wood to his shop and clean them up, dry them out, and from those trashed pieces of lumber he would create instruments of rare beauty.

It has since been discovered that while that wood floated in those dirty harbors, microbes went into the wood and ate out the center of those cells. This left just a fibrous infrastructure of the wood that created resonating chambers for the music. From wood that nobody wanted, Stradivarius produced violins that now everybody wants. Just as this poor violin maker transformed trash into treasure, God can transform even us into disciples.

The parable doesn't explain the origin or purpose of evil. It's considered a fact of our present existence. In our world good and bad live side by side. The parable promises that evil will be abolished at the harvest time when the kingdom of God fully comes and the good is separated from the bad....but until then.... good and bad will be neighbors.

The parable of the Crazy Sower taught us that we are to sow the word of God wherever we go because we don't have the capacity to judge what is going on in the hearts of those with whom we share God's love. This parable of the Crazy Gardener teaches us that in addition, we don't have the ability to judge whether the people we meet are good--wheat planted in the world by Jesus, or bad--weeds planted by the enemy, OR whether they are weeds like Saul who are in transition on their way to being changed by the risen Christ..

One day God will call all of us to accountability. God will ask, "Did you tell the people what they wanted to hear or, did you tell them the truth?" I want to be able to respond, "Yes, Lord, I told them the truth, the hard truth as well as the gentle truth.

Until then we are all growing in a field--side by side, good and bad. Until the end, we will continue to have pain and sorrow, suffering and shame. Until then we will experience the same aches and pains that everyone experiences in life.

Cancer strikes the high and mighty and the low and weakly. Until then we will have to be patient. Until then WE will all, good and bad, experience the same blazing sun and pouring rain. Until then our job is to have the patience while we serve resisting the temptation to be pulling weeds. Until then we will be about the task of watering and tending and caring for everyone we meet and trusting the One who told us to do so through this parable of the ... crazy gardener.

Let's pray. We thank you, Lord Jesus that you do not deal harshly with us, uprooting the good with the evil. We pray that we will be agents of transformation in our world, that as we love you with all our heart minds soul and strength, that as we love our neighbors as ourselves, in hopes that that we and our neighbors can be transformed into the wheat you desire us to be.

We pray for those who are ill at ease,

We pray for those in need, especially for the children who have made a dangerous journey to get away from places even more dangerous. We pray for the peace of Christ to reign in hearts and to work its way out into our world that seems to be more hell bent on inflicting harm than sharing love. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

- 1 (From "Why the Boss Said No" by Barbara Brown Taylor, in Bread of Angels).
- 2 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Collected Sermons, by James Merritt
- 3 Some of you may relate to one homemaker who wrote: I don't do windows because . . . I love birds and don't want one to run into a clean window and get hurt. I don't wax floors because . . . I am terrified a guest will slip and get hurt then I'll feel terrible (plus they may sue me.) I don't disturb cobwebs because . . . I want every creature to have a home of their own. I don't Spring Clean because . . . I love all the seasons and don't want the others to get jealous. I don't put things away because . . . my husband will never be able to find them again. I don't do gourmet meals when I entertain because . . . I don't want my guests to stress out over what to make when they invite me over for dinner. I don't iron because . . . I choose to believe them when they say "Permanent Press." And finally: I don't pull weeds in the garden because . . . I don't want to get in God's way. God is an excellent designer!

As we make our way around Baytown, or maybe on vacation, we will meet a lot of people, some good, some bad. ..and some in transition. Some of the people we meet are Weeds and some are Wheat. And some were Weedies on their way to becoming Wheaties.