

A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost (Year A)

Sunday, July 12, 2020

Isaiah 44:6-8

Psalm 86:11-17

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

We have before us this morning the parable of the wheat and the weeds. This parable, while perhaps not as well-known as last week's parable of the sower, is critically important.

Another parable he put before them, saying (Matt. 13:24) . . . and here I'll paraphrase a bit.

There is a field, and in it a farmer plants good seed. But, while everyone is asleep, an enemy plants bad seed in with the good seed. As the seeds begin to grow, those who work on the farm notice trouble. There are weeds in the field, threatening to choke out all of the good growth.

So, they run to the farmer, "I thought you planted the good stuff," they question. And then they try to get to work. They try to get those weeds out of there before the wheat is damaged irreparably.

But, strangely, the farmer says, "No. Do nothing." You can't be trusted to know what is good and bad. If you try to pull up the weeds, you'll sometimes get it wrong, and then the wheat will suffer too. Let them grow together, he says, at harvest time it will all be sorted.

Last week, I preached about the Godly Play approach to the parables: an approach of wonder—an acknowledgment that parables operate in the realm of both the obvious and the mysterious, concealing Jesus' meaning even as they reveal it. There is so much to wonder about here and so many different directions to explore. I hope that you'll take this parable with you as you walk through the world this week, try it on, and see what treasures it produces.

As I took it with me, I remembered an old On Being interview. Krista Tippett interviewed physician and writer Rachel Remen, founder of the Remen Institute for the Study of Health and Illness. In this incredible conversation, Remen speaks to the difference between curing and healing. She reflects, "We thought we could cure everything, but it turns out that we can only cure a small amount of human suffering. The rest of it needs to be healed, and that's different."¹

The parable of the wheat and the weeds quite obviously speaks to what we can all see for ourselves. There is true good in the world, good that God intended. And, there is true evil in the world, evil

¹ Krista Tippett, interview with Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, "The Difference Between Curing and Healing," On Being, Nov. 22, 2018, <https://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-naomi-remen-the-difference-between-fixing-and-healing-nov2018>.

whose origin is not God, but evil that is allowed by God for now. And this evil sometimes looks like what is good. Because the weed of this parable is darnel, and it looks just like wheat, especially early on, and it kills wheat by overwhelming its roots.

Why evil? That might be one question we wonder about, but this parable doesn't seem all that interested in that. Instead, it asks a different question: What do we do about it? Should we get to work pulling weeds?

There are certainly plenty of them. St. Paul's words ring loud and true: *The whole creation has been groaning until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait* (Rom. 8:23).

We are living in the midst of two pandemics which we are being forced to confront: COVID-19 and white supremacy. How we are reacting to these issues is putting on full display both the best of us and the worst of us. We recognize that something has gone terribly wrong. We see weeds and our righteous instincts often lead us headlong into the fray. The good will only flourish if we focus first on the bad. We must confront evil, pull it up by the roots, and set it on fire. This feels like the work of God.

And yet, in the words of Samuel Wells,

The parable says there are two things wrong with this approach. First, it doesn't work. You can't clean up the world. If you set about rooting up evil, you root up the good too. . . And second, taking it upon yourself to rid the world of evil shows a lack of faith that that's exactly what God will do at the end of history.²

Perhaps what feels like the work of God is actually us trying to do God's work.

We are not equipped to do the work of sorting good from evil. Sometimes evil dons the costume of good and sometimes good can be mistaken for evil. Because our sight is limited by our own sin, by the evil lurking within ourselves and our lives. My friends, we too are a mixed bag: good seed and bad seed cohabitating. We want desperately to have faith in our own ability to perceive what the world needs, what our neighbor needs, and what we need and yet in the field of our own heart are a most stubborn sort of weeds, choking out our humility and urging us to judgment.

How quickly righteousness turns to rightness.

Wait, the parable says. Wait. Do nothing. Leave it with God.

If I were with you in person, then I would try to read the room right now. I'm picturing those of you who wear your reactions pretty visibly on your face. You know who you are. Or, perhaps you don't, but I know who you are. I'd be looking for the, "but . . ."

² Samuel Wells, "Revolutionary Patience," A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel, July 20, 2008, <https://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/July20RevolutionaryPatiencesecondversion.pdf>.

Leave it with God. But, . . .

But aren't we as Christians meant to be God's hands and feet? Aren't we as Christians meant to do something? And of course, the answer is yes. Yes, we are meant to do. We are meant to tend God's field. To do the work placed in front of us. To water, to watch, to tend the soil, to erect scarecrows and to rid the field of all manner of pests that might eat the crop. We are meant to love, to heal. But, we are not meant to weed, to cure, because we do not see clearly and we do not judge well. And our tendency towards eradication does not fully appreciate the field we are standing in.

Because, as Wells says, "the way God deals with evil is not through root and branch expulsion and slash and burn destruction. It's through cross and resurrection."³

"We thought we could cure everything," Remen told Tippet. "We thought we could cure everything."⁴ But they couldn't. We can't. But, curing is different than healing. Healing acknowledges that while we cannot cure, our work is to stay present even in the midst of pain, suffering, and death. To tend the field.

As a physician who teaches physicians about to how to heal when they cannot cure, Remen looks her limitations squarely in the eye. She acknowledges the limits of her capacity. And yet, out of this seed of acknowledgement grows a glorious new vision. One where the power of patience and presence, listening and witnessing, leads to healing and wholeness, and not just in the one identified as sick but in the world. Healing beyond our capacity for sight. Deliverance in the midst of suffering. Resurrection hope lived in full view of the cross.

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:24-25).

Sinners and saints. We grow together by the grace of God. My prayer for all of us is that we be granted humility and faithful patience as we tend the field. May we trust that God's judgment will come. That sin will be overcome. And that evil will be rooted out for all time. In you. In me. And in the world.

³ Wells, "Revolutionary Patience."

⁴ Krista Tippet, interview with Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen.