

## The God of Crooked Lines

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

We had a neighbor some years ago whose lawn was immaculate - perfectly trimmed, evenly mowed, seldom even a stray leaf to disturb the smooth pattern, and not one dandelion. But the overall effect (the look) of the landscaping was rather stark. The lawn was too pristine, if that is possible. There was some shrubbery, but few blooming plants; one could only assume that he feared the blossoms might leave too much residue on that finely manicured lawn. And, there were only few trees in his lawn. The ones he had were on the boarder of our yard. I think he had the trees on the border so he would only have to rake half of the leaves come fall...So, why do I think that? Well, there is a park across the street with lots of trees and the fallen leaves would populate our lawns. Of course, our neighbor would faithfully rake the leaves that fell in his yard and carry them across the street and dump them back under the park trees (even though the borough would pick up leaves left on the curb)! When borough manager came by he told him to stop, but our neighbor replied, "That's where they came from, only fitting to return them!" ...Now, as pristine as the lawn was, you may have already figured out, that Linda and I were careful to dig out every dandelion in our yard to prevent those white fluffy seed heads drifting into his yard. His yard was so weed-free, should a dandelion pop up, he surly would have known where it came from, and most-likely return it to its rightful owners...

Try as we all might like to have it otherwise, weeds, and the inconvenience they cause... they're a part of life. It's one thing to try to keep our yards and gardens and flowerbeds neat and as weed-free as possible; it's quite another when we attempt to live our lives as if they are "weed-free," denying the reality of struggle, pain, uncertainty, and brokenness; acting as if it is our God-given right to lead lives in which disturbing events never come our way. And yet, truth be told, who among us does not encounter weeds in the midst of our daily living? In the imagery of this morning's Gospel lesson, do we not find our own lives to be a peculiar mix of wheat and weeds?

Jesus tells the parable about a farmer who sows good seed, only to discover, as harvest time draws near, that an enemy has sown (sowed) weeds among the wheat. I understand that there was a seed in ancient Palestine called bearded darnel – commonly called bastard wheat by the ancient Hebrews because the young plants so closely resembled wheat that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other - until the plants formed a head. But by harvest time, the roots of the two varieties of plants were so intertwined that the weeds could not be pulled out without tearing up the good crop as well.

At harvest time, however, it became imperative that the bearded darnel be separated from the wheat, because the darnel's grain was slightly poisonous, causing dizziness and sickness...even a small amount left a bitter, unpleasant taste in your mouth. It is not surprising, then, that the farmer, warned his servants when they recognize the bearded darnel growing alongside the wheat, advised, "Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn." (Matthew 13:30).

Jesus was a master at taking everyday occurrences and prompting us to look at those incidents more deeply. The British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge once wrote that, "every happening in life, whether great or small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life, is to discern the message" ...However the meanings of these life's parables are not always easy to discern, and that is indeed the case with the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Jesus does not provide simplistic answers to the complexities of life. Rather, in the telling of parables, Jesus often challenges our desire/our want for simplistic solutions (masks...therapeutic drug...vaccine) to life's deepest dilemmas. Indeed, Jesus frequently confronts and challenges our customary ways of doing things and our comfortable perspective on life, pointing us instead in the direction of an alternative world. Jesus points us to a new reality, to life in the kingdom of God.

When we consider the parable, it's tempting to assume that you and I are the sowers of the good seed, while those, who we see as enemies...they're the sowers of the bad seed. Christians have a long history of pointing a finger at any who don't measure up to our standards - a history of crusades and inquisitions, of wars and persecutions, of domination and power misused and abused.

But perhaps the parable forces us first to take a look at our own weeds; the parable urges us to examine the brokenness and selfishness buried deep within us, before making judgment about the weeds in others' lives.

Jesus offers that same perspective in the Sermon on the Mount when prodding his listeners:

*"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5).*

Isn't Jesus calling you and me to move beyond self-righteous judgment of others, to willingly explore the weeds buried deep within our own hearts, to confront the hard realities of our own lives? Those of us who profess to live as followers of Jesus are led to question, "Do we seek to embrace and model the light of Christ, or do we choose to walk in darkness"?

Henri Nouwen in an article about Christian leadership, (*In The Name of Jesus*,) laments that "the long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led." And then Nouwen suggest that those who resist this temptation, those who acknowledge and confront their inner weeds—these are the ones who give us hope.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds resists offering easy answers to the question of “why God allows evil in the world”. George Buttrick, noted preacher in the early 20th century, once said, “that while the parable resists easy explanations for the reality of evil in human life, still the parable does not seek to explain away the presence of evil”.

Human sinfulness and selfishness are givens in life; the challenge before us is to choose to live, not by the way of selfishness and greed and suspicion and fear, but in the light of God’s graciousness and God’s goodness, God’s compassion and grace, God’s mercy and peace. The challenge is to live now as if God’s kingdom were fully present.

Truth is, God seldom operates in human life as we would anticipate. From little on up, we have learned that the shortest route between two points is a straight line. But God seldom moves along straight lines; God seldom plants in straight rows. And it is not uncommon for us to question, in the face of uncertainty, “Where is God now”? The ancient Israelites, forced to live in exile in enemy land after the destruction of their beloved temple and the holy city of Jerusalem, found the music drained from their souls. All hope and meaning in life appeared to be lost, and the psalmist found himself lamenting, “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4). Nevertheless the psalmist reminds himself of that which cannot be immediately seen - the promise of God’s upholding love, a love that is present even at those times when life comes crashing down upon us.

I am sure you remember the story from even earlier Hebrew history when Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, nevertheless becomes a leader in the Egyptian court. When drought later hits the land, the brothers travel from their homeland to Egypt seeking grain. Unbeknownst to the brothers, Joseph, whom they presumed to be dead, is now in a position of authority, and after testing the brothers, finally reveals his true identity. Though they fear retaliation and revenge, Joseph says simply, “Do not be afraid! Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

In other words, as the saying goes, “God writes straight with crooked lines”. The God of crooked lines was able to bring about good, even when humans intended evil.

The apostle Paul conveys a similar message in his letter to the Romans, chapter eight, when he asserts, “...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (8:28). Note that Paul does not say, *All things are good*, but rather, *God is able to fashion good even out of our times of pain, grief, despair, loss*. The memory of those experiences, no doubt, will remain difficult and painful, but over time, we begin to see how the God of crooked lines is able to bring forth healing and a greater degree of wholeness in our living.

It’s a truth we need to be reminded of, again and again, for faith is a matter of trusting that the God of crooked lines, the God who holds us in arms of love, is at work in us and among us even when, in our limited vision, we see no indication of that work. That’s why Jesus is so insistent that we begin to live here and now as if God’s realm is fully present among us. In the list of beatitudes that form the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to a new way of seeing and experiencing life. When he proclaims, *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled* (Matthew 5:6), Jesus is asserting that, no matter how far the vision of life in God’s realm seems from us, no matter how far beyond our grasp the life of justice and compassion and peace appears to be, the promise is that we shall be satisfied.

We shall be filled. We shall have enough. In other words, as we hunger and thirst and pray for and work for the life that is sometimes labeled *the impossible possibility*, the God of crooked lines offers us surprising tastes of that new life.

But we're not there yet, are we? We have not yet fully arrived. Weeds still grow among the wheat...Yet we live in this promise, that the God of crooked lines is at work, fashioning good out of our brokenness and our weakness, forming hope in the midst of despair, creating peace that far surpasses all human understanding, extending grace that knows no limits, loving us with a love that will not let us go, offering healing, forgiveness, and new life to our sin-sick souls. Thanks be to the God of crooked lines. Amen.

May the seed of Christ's word, planted and watered by the Holy Spirit, find root, and grow in your hearts. May your work and your relationships reflect Christ's constant presence in the days of this week. Amen.

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July 19, 2020      Hatfield Church of the Brethren