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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

In the Parable of the Sower, which we read together last week, Jesus is concerned with difference and the different learning styles and abilities that allow people of faith to grow. The prevalent mood of the parable of the weeds is less positive, the focus being on people who do not behave in a kingdom-wise manner. We assume that Jesus is still addressing the same crowd, from the same boat, so perhaps this is a way of drawing a different distinction of types within the same group of people.

What is your own experience of weeds? Are you the sort of person who would not know a dandelion from a cowslip or do you have good gardening knowledge? When gardening or farming pulling weeds disturbs the soil and slows the growth of the other plants, given that 1st century farmers did not have herbicides or modern agricultural machinery, often the best way to deal with weeds was to harvest them with the crop and separate them before binding the wheat into sheaves. With Jesus using a metaphor that his listeners would readily understand, the idea of good and bad, saved and lost, redeemed and damned living together and being inseparable in life, would be easily apprehended by his audience.

– Open questions and opening questions

Reading through this text, look for opposites in the pictures of salvation Jesus paints for his listeners. Perhaps take a piece of paper and write two columns, one for positives and one for negatives.

Does the story have more negatives than positives?

How do the opposites strike you?

What are the listeners to do?

Who is in control of the harvest and of the division into weeds and wheat?

Text

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to

someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" ... Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Comment

This text brings to the fore for readers the question of how we view or understand the 'Evil One'. Jesus draws two groups of people out of the crowd before him, the good seed is the people who belong to the Kingdom; the weeds are the people who belong to the Evil One. Where in the parable of the sower he had four groups of people, now he draws only two. The wheat and the weeds themselves are plants, entirely passive in the story. We so often think of ourselves as the actors in the spiritual world. As if human choice, human action, human activity is the main focus of all creation. In this story, the action is all on a spiritual plane, between the 'Son of Man' and the 'Evil One.'

Are there times when action is in fact not the best thing? Can we think of situations, or perhaps times in our lives, when we have simply had to leave to God the answering of the difficult questions and trusted in our faith? As wheat growing in the field needs water, light and nutrients, so God feeds and provides for us spiritually and the weed growing next to us is not our responsibility in this story. It is up to God to send his angels, the harvest workers, to divide the crop from the weeds.

A question for Jesus' listeners must have been who or what is the 'Evil One'? There is certainly no description in the text of a medieval style devil such as we might see in pictures with horns and a long tail. Jesus has no interest in describing or personifying the 'Evil One'. Instead, he focusses his description of the parable on the responsibility for salvation, or for damnation, resting with God alone.

If we think for a moment about the master's servants, who do we think they are in this analogy? The disciples? Whoever they are they want to act, 'Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?' they asked him and he replies in the negative, the purpose of the story is not to start an inquisition or witch-hunt. The desire to 'play God' or tear up the weeds is to be resisted.

The harvest is the end of the age. There is to be no judgement during this life that is all placed beyond our current human existence. The end of the story is set 'beyond time.'

The explanation comes after 'Jesus had left the crowd and gone indoors'. There is the public exposition of a story, and the private explanation for only a trusted few. Perhaps some of the ideas in the story are too explosive for proper analysis with a wider audience? Or maybe the complexity of the explanation was felt by Jesus to be beyond the comprehension of the crowd?

Whatever his motivation, we carry away from this parable a lesson in learning acceptance and in peaceful living which allows our neighbour to flourish and grow beside us. In leaving to God the task of sorting the crop, we are withholding our judgement of others, which ultimately allows the whole of humanity at least the chance to flourish and bear fruit.

Response

Have you ever tried relaxation, mindfulness, meditation or yoga? What would be your method of reflecting on acceptance and allowing God to separate the weeds and the wheat? Why not take some time this week to relax and think about acceptance?

OR

If you have access to a garden, a community garden, and allotment or open space, why not do some weeding. Working patiently and methodically in the open air, what thoughts come to you? Can you formulate them in prayer? Do you feel as Dorothy Frances Gurney did in her famous poem, that you are 'Closer to God in a garden, than anywhere else on earth?'

Prayer

Son of Man
All humanity is part of you
How we long to own
judgements that do not belong to us.
To cast a negative glance and
see a weed in another
to set ourselves apart from
'people like these.'
Son of woman
Messiah and saviour
Yet one who would not
put out a flickering candle,
nor crush a bruised reed.
There is gentleness in your
judgement, yet power and
fire in the consequence
for all those who cause harm
to the smallest of your children.
Child of humanity
do we prefer to take the chair
set the parties count the votes
rule who is 'in' and who is 'out'
Forgive us our weediness
The intrusion into the
good growth of others
that is our exclusion of them.
Our placing injustice

above grace;
division above acceptance
of difference.
Hold until the end times
all our judgements for us
enable us to lay them
before the winnowing angels
without shame.
AMEN

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Exclusion and Prejudice