

To Weed, or Not To Weed

Matthew 13:24-30

July 17, 2011

I've been in Atlanta for the past two weeks studying at Columbia Seminary. I continue to be grateful to you as a congregation to allow me space and time to pursue my Doctor of Ministry degree. One of my observations is that whenever I get back from a class, at least for the first week, my preaching blurs the line between sermon and lecture. You can let me know how to classify today's offering after the service. My class these past two weeks was on the parables. If you think that means I now understand the point of the parables, let me be the first person to apologize. I don't. I read Bryan's sermon about the parable of the sower on the church website last week; looks like he could have taught my class. He is right on when he said that parables are about three steps beyond the linear, rational thinking that we tend to prefer. Bryan's quote was that "parables require not so much circular thinking as 'spiral' thinking: circling around and around the content of the parable again but always at higher levels."

I read that quote after I chose the one that is on the front cover of your bulletin. It seems CH Dodd heard Bryan preach last week, too. Dodd said that in our reading of parables, "we will be as confused as ever, but I hope we will be confused at a higher level and about more important things."

One of the things we tend to do with parables is treat them as allegories; we parse out what every character in the parable *represents*. Sometimes allegories may work (indeed, sometimes the gospel writers interpret Jesus parables that way), but certainly the meaning of the parables extends beyond allegory. In a sense, only reading parables as allegory could be a little too obvious. As my professor said, if the points Jesus was trying to make in his parables were really so clear, why did he use a parable? Why not just be direct?

Today's lectionary reading is, you guessed it, a parable from Matthew's gospel - starting at the 24th verse of the 13th chapter. Listen with me for the word of God...

+++

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.’”

+++

So what’s the point? What is the moral? Is Jesus talking about salvation? Who do the characters represent? And what does it mean for us?

I’m probably not going offer any satisfying answer to those questions. So I want to invite you to set these questions aside and listen to a story. It is story I heard from a friend in my preaching group.

Joe - who is my friend and a pastor in Dallas - joined the Rotary Club soon after his move into town. He learned to do what most Rotarians (and Presbyterians) do, and he sat with the same people at lunch each time he attended a meeting. Over time, Joe and one of the people at his table developed a little ritual. The man knew that Joe was a pastor in town, so

each Tuesday he would ask, “what is the sermon about this Sunday, preacher?” And each time, Joe would say, “God.”

“What’s the sermon about this Sunday preacher?” “God.” So it went for a long while...every Tuesday, same exchange. One week, the question came again, “What’s the sermon about this Sunday, preacher?” “God.” Then the man paused, look at Joe earnestly, and said, “You know what? I realize that when my pastor preaches, the sermons are never about God.”

Here’s the challenge: try to think about this parable without making it about us; about what it means for our salvation. Instead, what if we read this parable as a way to describe the character of God?

+++

There were weeds in a field that had been sown with good seed which was to produce wheat. No one knew about the weeds, of course, because they had been sown by an enemy of the owner of the field.

I wonder what motivated the enemy in polluting this field with weeds. A hostile attempt at increasing the enemy’s market share? Retribution for something the landowner had done to the enemy in the past? I wonder...

But no, no one knew about the weeds until they started to sprout up – and you can be sure that if you were one of the field hands that worked the land your first thought when you saw the evidence of the weeds amidst the crop of wheat would have been “Oh...no!” (or the middle eastern equivalent of that phrase).

The field hands approached the landowner with a brilliant piece of self-preserving speech, ““Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” Don’t miss the pronoun there. The field hands want to make it clear that THEY had nothing to do with these weeds that threaten the crop.

It turns out, the field hands had nothing to fear – for the landowner knew that the weeds are an enemies doing. But then, the landowner does something peculiar: he tells the field hands not to pull up the weeds, but to let them grow alongside the wheat. The landowner’s expressed logic in this

decision is to protect the good crop from being uprooted by the pulling of weeds.

Actually, what we know about weeds in Palestine is that it is much better to pull them up as soon as possible and as often as needed. The weed that is the #1 suspect is *zizania*, a poisonous type that closely resembles wheat in the early stages of growth. Not only would it be better for the crop to pull these weeds early, it would also take a lot less work – because separating the weeds from the wheat at harvest is an extremely difficult and time consuming task.

I imagine the field hands knew all of this – and though Jesus doesn't record them saying anything to the landowner's face in the parable, you can bet that more than a few words were exchanged when they were out of ear shot.

Ultimately, the landowner's plan for the weeds was to let them grow alongside the wheat until they were harvested, separated, bundled, and burned.

So here's the thing about burning. The only kind of fuel for things like cooking and heating up water was some kind of resource that created fire. Those resources were not plentiful in Palestine. Think about it: if things go according to the landowner's plan, at the harvest he will have – not only a crop in the wheat, but a source of fuel in the weeds.

I notice a few things about this landowner:

- Instead of retaliating against the enemy who intends to do him wrong, he thinks creatively about how to benefit from the situation; in the end, it could just be that the landowner – not the enemy – gets the last laugh.¹
- In choosing to let the poisonous weeds grow up amidst the wheat, the landowner has a lot of confidence in the seed that has been planted; enough to go against the conventional wisdom of the field hands.
- For those who hear this story, we don't know if this plan will work. There is no resolution. The weeds are still growing with the wheat. All we can do with the landowner's words is trust that he knows what

¹ From Barbara Ried's book, *Parables for Preachers* (Liturgical Press, 2001) p. 98.

he is doing. That, and be patient – which seems to be the prevailing attitude of the landowner.

+++

I wonder if these are the kinds of things that describe God?

What if God is less concerned with the energy it takes to purify the field, and more with allowing for the field to grow?

What if God is that creative? That God would find ways to use what seems poisonous and threatening for some greater purpose?

What if God's attitude toward the enemy doesn't seek retaliation and retribution?

What if – amidst the concern of all those who live and work in the field – God really is as non-anxious and patient as this landowner seems to be. Trusting. Abiding. Providing.

+++

In living in the parables these last two weeks, I've been challenged to think about the God I believe in; and why I believe that God is who I think God is.

Sometimes – whether we know it or not – we allow our expectations of God to define the character of God.

And then Jesus unsettles us with these stories that make us look closer at who God really is; and what God's kingdom is really about...

And that leaves us with some choices about how we will live, and what we will believe that we will always need to revisit. And then revisit again. And again. And again...

+++

