

July 19, 2020 Pentecost 7A
Matthew 13:24-30
Where Do I put my Energy?

Let's focus our thinking today with a couple of stories. You remember the "Peanuts" newspaper cartoons, right? There is one in which Lucy explains to her little brother Linus about the existence of good and evil. She tells him that he, like others, have inside these two forces. Linus looks at his stomach with a distressed look on his face and declares, "I can feel them in there fighting."

The other comes from Native American tradition. One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

"My dear one, the battle between two 'wolves' is inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego.

The other is good. It is: joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a moment and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee replied, "The one you feed."

In today's gospel, we find Jesus telling a parable that uses a similar image – good wheat and evil weeds, fighting it out in a farmer's field. It's also the same story in whatever newspaper any of us read this morning – good and evil fighting it out in the world. There is a force at every level of existence that works against all this good stuff God wants to do. There is a force that seeks to destroy the loving nature of creation. There is a force that exerts every effort to suck the lifeblood out of everything that promotes prosperity and health and hope and peace and joy. The Bible has a lot of different names for this: Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, Lucifer, or "the evil one." By whatever designation we choose, its intent, its nature, is to un-

make what God has created and to deface, distort, and destroy whatever good it may latch onto, as it eats away at it with parasitic intensity.

Through today's parable, Jesus gives us an illustration of the power of the evil force that can invade every aspect of life. He makes this clear by painting a picture of weeds growing alongside wheat, imitating the good grain and intertwining its roots and growth with what was planted by the farmer, who stands for Christ. And how did the weeds get into the field? Jesus says simply that the weeds came from an enemy, the devil, the evil one.

"An enemy of God" is as good an answer as we will ever find for the source of that which works against God. We recognize at the very beginning of our life in Christ that we are constantly invaded by the "weeds." We even add this to our baptism and confirmation vows and say we "renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways."

And though we renounce the evil that the weeds represent, we also recognize something else in our baptismal vows. We see that our lives, like the field in the parable, grow with evil intertwined among the grace, love, and godly obedience that we promise to trust and employ in our Christian living. And we know from experience that no matter how intent we are to follow our vows, none of us will ever totally avoid the corrupting influences and tempting thoughts that lead us to go against the values of God.

Maybe that's what makes so many of us anxious to do something, anything, about perceived forms of evil in our close communities and in the wider world. In today's parable, Jesus has the slaves ask almost immediately whether they should destroy the weeds. That sounds like a natural reaction, doesn't it? What farmer would not seek to destroy weeds that suck vital nutrients from a well-planted crop? Wasn't that our first reaction when we experienced the evil of the 911 attacks, the murder of George Floyd? When human beings think they know the source and reality of evil, they almost always want to pinpoint it and do away with it as swiftly and certainly as possible. Seeing with what we assume is a crystal-clear view of what is good and what is evil, we move ahead, absolutely certain that we are right and just in eradicating what seems obviously ungodly.

But history shows how often this is folly. Any number of "witch hunts" reveal that they were more about making the hunters feel secure than

actually doing something about evil. Still, we often have a strong urge, when threatened and fearful, to find something to cut out, weed out, push down, crush, or otherwise stop and destroy. Should we not admit that this kind of behavior often simply functions as an escape from a more complex reality? That's the argument Jesus seems to be laying out in his response to the slaves who would dig out the weeds. Wait, he has the farmer insist, until time for the harvest, because the process of ripping out the weeds will certainly destroy the wheat in the process. Doesn't this ring true in the depths of our confessions? Don't we really know this truth – that the evil is strongest when it disguises itself as good and manages to incapacitate the creatures of God with the resulting confusion?

This truth is hard to accept, as we find Jesus telling us something we really don't want to hear – to leave the judging until later, to recognize that throwing the weeds into the fire is God's job, not ours. When we encounter what we see as evil, we want to find the source and destroy it. We often are impelled by the false wisdom of, "Don't just stand there, do something!" But as he so often does, Jesus uses this parable to make us rethink our human reactions, and he turns us in an opposite direction by having the owner say, in effect, "Don't just do something, stand there!" Wait to let the nature of the godly prosper and prevail in due course. Profoundly, Jesus is leading us to cease chasing after the bad, and rather concentrate on the good.

The farmer could tolerate the actions of his enemy because he knew he would make it all right in the harvest, reaping the good and destroying the bad. Jesus is saying to us that we can relax in knowing that we don't have to be in the judging business or in the business of destroying that which would work against God, because the owner of the farm, God himself, will make it all come out right in the end.

So we are left, finally, with a teaching that we would do best by paying less attention to the weeds – the evil in life – and simply staying away from it. Better for us to spend more time tending the wheat – the good in life – fostering its growth and putting it to use as Jesus would have us do, following the values of God's Kingdom.

Like Linus of the Peanuts cartoon, we certainly recognize in ourselves and in the complex workings of the world in which we live the conflict that Linus experienced as a fist fight in his gut. Yet in the unlikely teaching of

the wheat and the weeds, Jesus leaves us with a counterintuitive approach to dealing with this anxiety. What it means to respond in this way to any evil – ranging from the horrors of terrorism to the selfishness of not caring for a neighbor in need – leaves us fighting against the very nature of our worldly humanity, fighting against nearly every instinct we feel, and against nearly every example we learn from history. To even suggest such an approach is bound to lead to harsh and bitter disagreement, if not utter disbelief, on the other side of the debate. In the conventional wisdom of the world, the teaching of this parable seems crazy and impossible.

Yet we know that it *is* possible. We see it in Jesus Himself. Indeed, at the decisive moment of his ministry, Jesus left the ultimate exclamation point on the meaning of today's parable. Dying on the cross, he did not seek to destroy his enemies who sowed the lethal seeds that choked out his life. Rather, he forgave them. He looked to God to sort it out in the end. And we can – in the best moments of living out the vows of our baptisms and as we faithfully look at the end of the passion story – discover that the power of the Resurrection proves the truth of the parable of the wheat and weeds. In so doing, we will recommit ourselves to leaving the weeds to God. In so doing, we will, in ourselves and in the world around us, turn all our hearts and souls to nurturing the wheat that God has given us.