

February 12, 2023: THIS DAY'S SERMON – Parables of the Kingdom

Readings: Matthew 13:24-33; Psalm 84:1-7

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Parables. Just when we think we have gotten it all figured out – just when we think we can breathe a little, feel comfortable that we have most of the answers – Jesus throws a couple of parables at us. The answers we thought we had make no sense. We are led to less certainty and more questions.

On their face, this morning's parables evoke thoughts of profit and loss; abundance and shortage; good versus evil. They are, quite bluntly, ridiculous. What nature of person would go out into a field in the dark of night to sow weed seed amongst the good seed being grown to provide for the well being of others?

Who would see a huge bush which attracts birds into the middle of a field as a good thing? In the Jewish world, what woman would deliberately permeate the dough she will use to feed her household with yeast – a symbol of sin which had to be completely removed from the house before the Festival of Passover?

And, finding a pearl and then hiding it? I do not know about you, but if I find something of value, the last thing I am going to do is hide it. On the top of my game I have to write a note to myself in order to remind me of where I have put "valuable" things. And then I have to hope to remember where I have put that note for safekeeping. The last thing I am going to do is bury it in land that clearly does not belong to me and then go off in the hopes of buying the land before someone beats me to it or finds the treasure I have buried and taken it for themselves.

At the end of the day, it seems that this Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus comes to proclaim is so completely beyond us that trying to figure it out borders on the ridiculous. If that is so, what is the real point to it? Just what is it that Jesus wants us to learn here?

I do not know about you, but it seems to me that there have been an awful lot of weeds cropping up in our field lately. You know it. I know it. We know some of it together and some of it is carried privately within our families and closest relationships.

As I read this morning's Psalm, it seems that what Jesus is telling us is that weeds happen in the midst of the wheat of our lives and we need to trust God to keep us focused on the wheat rather than the weeds.

The good news is that, in the midst of the weeds, we can find comfort in our Psalm for this morning. More particularly, that comfort is found in verse 6: "As they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs."

The Valley of Baca is mentioned only once in the Bible. The Hebrew word *baca* is related to *bakah*, which means to weep. Baca refers to a type of "weeping" tree; a tree that drips resin, such as a balsam or aspen. The name of the valley indicates a dry, arid region, since this is where these types of weeping trees tend to grow.

Psalm 84 is classified as a pilgrimage psalm, sung as praise by those who traveled to Jerusalem to worship. These were often hard journeys, covering great distances through the wilderness in order to reach their destination. Sounds a lot like life, does it not? The life Jesus refers to in the parable of the weeds and wheat. The psalmist uses the Valley of Baca symbolically to illustrate a difficult and sorrowful path in life.

Like Jesus' parable, the twist comes at the end of verse 6, where the person forced to go through a time of weeping finds that God has turned their tears into a well, providing water.

Is not that what the Kingdom of heaven is? Always knowing, remembering, believing – or always having someone to remind us to know and remember and believe – that God is aware of every thing, big and small, that is going on in our lives. That even in the midst of the weeds, God is the good sower, capturing our tears in his hand, collecting them, and using them to nourish and nurture our faith when it falters.

It seems that what Jesus wants is what God wants: Relationship. A relationship that is honest and vulnerable, built on trust. A relationship that does not falter in the storm, but has the potential to thrive because it does not stand alone. Jesus tells the disciples in the end, basically, that they do not have to worry about the weeds: God will sort that out at the end of the day ... and not a moment before, it seems.

We do not have to worry about taking care of that. The weeds can never overtake the wheat and it seems it is not our job to pull it. What we are called to do is remember who and whose we are. What we can do is notice and nourish and care for the wheat – the goodness and love of God that continues to be sown throughout the world.

This happened to Pr. Phil and myself on our way back last Wednesday. It had been a good trip, spending valuable time with family and old friends, with some weeds involving health issues with family and friends sown throughout.

Wednesday was our 9th anniversary and we had plans to celebrate it with a lovely dinner in Santa Fe. We were traveling along nicely on I-40 eastbound from Cottonwood, Arizona, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, when our Google

map alerted us to a problem: I-40 was shut down. It recommended that we take the next exit and take a road through a small town to avoid the shutdown.

We took the exit, only to be greeted by local law enforcement and to be told that Google Maps was wrong. That county road was not going to buy us any time. He told us we had two choices, both of which involved getting back on I-40. The first was to get on I-40, then exit at the entrance to a nearby casino, where we could pass the time.

The second was to continue on I-40 until we got to the shutdown and sit there and wait. We chose the latter, where we ended up sitting for a little longer than two hours. Frustrating, right? More dreaded weeds ... in the midst of our hopes for a day of celebration.

Through the blessing of our cellphone and its technology, we learned that the interstate had been shut down because of a traffic fatality. There had been a rollover accident involving a semi. The driver had died. The weeds in our own field were not magically plucked out, but they certainly were placed into context.

And then the beauty of the wheat revealed itself, mysteriously, unexpectedly: after more than an hour of sitting in two lanes of stopped traffic, Pr. Phil decided he needed to stretch his legs. He stepped out on the passenger side of the car, leaving the car door open. The trucker next to us rolled down his window and asked if we had any idea what was going on. Pr. Phil told him what we had learned about the trucker who had died.

The young man was visibly saddened, looking down, shaking his head. Pr. Phil asked him how a rollover like that might happen. He responded that it could have been that the trailer he was pulling was empty and a big gust of wind, common for that location, caught it and flipped him. The other, he was sad to say, was that the driver was just tired and dozed off, hit the shoulder and overcorrected.

Coming from a family of truck drivers, I am painfully aware of the dangers truckers face over the millions of miles they travel to deliver what we need. Seeing the distress in this young trucker, Pr. Phil and I simultaneously placed our hands in a posture of prayer and nodded to him. He responded simply, "Thank you. I appreciate it. My grandma prays for me every day."

"Richard" went on to tell us that both he and his little brother are truck drivers; his brother driving the East Coast and he driving the West. He had six hours in that day and still had a load to drop, but his concern was not on being held up. It was on another trucker who had died that day. We committed to praying for each other and Pr. Phil got back in the car.

Wheat. *Wheat*. Was this exchange between us a grand a gesture? As grand as the story I read this morning? An anonymous Pakistani man walked into the Turkish embassy in the United States and donated \$30 million to help earthquake victims. No. But it still matters. Every little act of kindness and forgiveness and generosity we extend – to both others and ourselves – works toward making the Kingdom of Heaven a reality.

Jesus acknowledges the weeds and tells us to acknowledge and accept them, too. He does not tell us to ignore them or go through life pretending they do not exist. He does not demand that we pull them out. Instead, he admonishes us to just let them be.

It seems, in fact, that acknowledging the weeds – without allowing them to take over our lives – can actually be a way of nourishing the wheat. In his explanation of the parable to the disciples, Jesus tells them that the wheat – or good seed – are the children of the kingdom. Conversely, the weeds are the children of the evil one. They exist within the world. They exist within us. Yes, even us.

Does not the question become: Which seed will we nurture? And does God really expect us to understand the Kingdom of Heaven? Or does God just want us to expect it ... and look for it ... and experience it – and help others experience it, too?

The Greek word for children is *huios*. It means anyone sharing the same nature as their Father. At the end of the day, God so loved this world that He sent His only Son – not to condemn it – but to save it; and God continues to love this world, weeds and all, still today. May we, therefore, live into the nature of the Creator that is ours: The nature of love and kindness; of justice and mercy; of forgiveness and healing and grace. To God be the glory.

Amen.