

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
23 July 2023
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Chapter 12 of the Gospel of Matthew is full of opposition. I believe this chapter gives us the context for chapter 13. In other words, the parables of Chapter 13 tell us why this opposition is taking place. Let us briefly review the opposition before we discuss our passage: The Pharisees become upset that Jesus' disciples pluck heads of grain during the Sabbath (12:1-8). The Pharisees went out and conspired to kill Jesus after he cures a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (12:9-14). Jesus is called the prince of demons by the Pharisees because he cures a demoniac who was blind and mute (12:22-32). The Pharisees are angry at Jesus because he calls them "A brood of vipers!" and proclaims judgement against them (12:33-37). Jesus refuses to give a sign to Scribes and Pharisees, whom he calls "An evil and adulterous generation" (12:38-42). Jesus accuses the Pharisees and Scribes and their "evil generation" of being filled with evil spirits (12:43-45). And, finally, the chapter ends with the family of Jesus, quite embarrassed about reports they have received about him, coming to 'rescue' him and save the family's honor. Someone tells Jesus, "Look your mother and your brothers are standing outside," to which Jesus responds, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (12:46-50.) Everyone opposes Jesus in Chapter 12, including his own family. The reader is left at the end of that chapter with the question, "Why?"

We began Chapter 13 last week, and the parable of the Sower gives us the first answer. Question, "Why do people oppose Jesus?" Answer, "because some seeds fall on rocky ground, without much soil, and are scorched by the sun. Some fall among thorns that choke them. And some fall in good soil, and only these produce fruit." Today we see the next answer. Question, "Why do people oppose Jesus?" Answer, "because an enemy has planted weeds among the wheat, and both good and evil seeds must grow side by side until the last day." Both good and evil coexist and cannot be separated until the Day of the Lord, when the sorting out takes place. The implication is that those who oppose Jesus, and their evil generation, may be the weeds growing among the wheat.

So, now that we know the general purpose of this parable. Let us review it in more detail. Various commentators (Jensen, Stoffregen, etc.) believe there are two types of enemies in this parable. The first is the original devil (diabolos) who plants the weeds amid the wheat at night. We have two choices here to understand this enemy. We can choose to believe that all the evil in the world that opposes the Messiah, and who are an obstacle to the fulfillment of God's will, is caused by the devil, whom many call Satan. If we take this option, we may place personal responsibility in jeopardy as we would have a ready answer to the question, "Why is there evil in the world?" We can always say,

“Because of the devil.” Then we can extend this a bit further and say that our evil behaviors are caused by the devil. “The devil made me do it! I bear no responsibility. An evil spirit forced me to cheat, rob, betray, kill, etc.” The reading supports this understanding of the enemy, but I believe the reading is pointing to a second option.

The meaning of devil is “one who slanders, one who is filled with malicious talk, (and, in a more general way) one who acts maliciously.” This answer for who the enemy is allows for the possibility of a supernatural enemy, but it also places the responsibility for sin squarely at the hands of humans. Why is there opposition to Jesus? Because of human sin. Why is there evil in the world? Because of personal sin. Why are there weeds that grow alongside God’s wheat? Because of personal sin, because of the evil intent and actions of humans who chose to separate themselves from God’s will. So, the enemy who plants weeds can be families who contribute to the pathology of criminals, oppressive systems who subjugate and abuse the innocent, politicians who polarize us and divide us out of evil intent (for their own purposes,) corporate mega structures that value profits above the welfare of their own employees, street criminals who kidnap, kill, and steal, etc. Anyone who acts out of malicious and evil intent can be the enemy who plants weeds among the wheat, even as they themselves are weed.

But there is another enemy in this passage, and that is the servants themselves. In their desire to help the master, they threaten the healthy wheat. They rush to their boss and ask, “Can we pull the weeds out?” They want to be the ones sorting the weeds from the wheat. In an attempt to help, perhaps out of good intentions, they assume they know what their master wants. As a commentator puts it, “The central problem in the parable is not the weeds and wheat, but the impatience of the slaves and their assumption that they knew exactly what their lord wished.” And here is where the parable connects to the original audience to whom it was preached. The Pharisees and the Scribes are in the business of separating weed from wheat. They add professions to the list of people not allowed to enter the Temple, they measure life in infractions, and they apply the Torah, the Jewish Law, to all sorts of situations. By the time of Jesus, there are at least 12 proscribed professions not allowed to give testimony in a court of law, not allowed to enter the Temple without major purification rituals, not allowed to associate with righteous Jews, not allowed to hold religious office, etc. Many in the original audience of Jesus acted with malicious intent in the application of the law, and in that regard, they had become the enemy who opposed him because he spent time with women of ill repute, tax collectors, people with leprosy, and other people considered “sinners.”

We can build a bridge to us today and to our own context. There are many good-intentioned people in our world today who feel it is their duty to defend God, to protect his honor, to rid themselves of evil by isolating from sinners, to judge those who belong and those who don’t belong. We too have lists of proscribed professions and people we

don't consider "good enough to be one of us." This reminds me of the German Theologian Karl Rahner, who once said, "The number one cause of atheism is Christians. Those who proclaim God with their mouths and deny Him with their lifestyles is what an unbelieving world finds simply unbelievable." (As quoted by Stoffregen [here](#).) Those who oppose Jesus are the malicious servants who want to take the job of judging the world away from God. A friend of mine used to say, "Remember, even the Second Baptists believe the First Baptists will go to hell." There is a long list of churches who have spent considerable time and money trying to decide which of their neighboring congregations will go to hell and who will be saved. We are busy assigning blame and separating, when we should be harvesting an abundant wheat harvest, building God's kingdom, spreading the Gospel around the world, and changing the world.

In Matthew, there are all sorts of sorting out: The wheat from the tares, the good from the bad fish, the goats from the lambs, etc. But this job belongs to God. This is especially important because we are often unable to distinguish wheat from weeds. This would have been the case in the parable, especially when the plants are young. The person we believe to be evil is often seen by others to be a hero or a saint. Back in 2003, when I refused to leave the Episcopal Church and join my former church as they left to join the new Anglican denomination, some of my friends believed I was a compromiser, a lukewarm Christian, perhaps a closeted liberal, and other unkind words. At the very same time, many Episcopalians applauded my desire to stay and preach the Gospel with integrity and passion within the denomination that had adopted me and helped me rediscover the Gospel of Jesus. I was a terrible sinner for some, and a great example to others. And perhaps both sides were right, and perhaps both sides were wrong.

Luther used to say that we are all "Simul justos et peccator." Both saints and sinners at the very same time. "The 'weeder's' judgmental attitude towards others is a prime indication that their thoughts and actions have been sown by the 'enemy' rather than the gracious God. Jesus did not weed out Judas from the twelve, even though, according to some accounts, Jesus knew about the upcoming betrayal before it occurred. Jesus did not weed out Peter from the twelve, even though he knew about his upcoming denials. Jesus knew that all the disciples would run away -- they were all "bad" followers. They weren't producing the fruit that was expected -- but he did not weed them out of the fellowship. If Jesus were to weed out all the imperfections, who would be left?" (Stoffregen, Ibid.)

The Gospel today invites both the original audience and us, the new audience, to a lifestyle of radical inclusion of the other. We don't have to accept what people do in order to love them as children of God. It is not our job to judge the motivations or actions of people. This is God's job and the job will be accomplished in due time. For now, we must love others as God loves us in his Son, the Savior of the World, the one who died for sinners like you and me. May God continue to bless you. Amen!