

GOOD AND BAD ALL IN MIX
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Oct. 1, 2016
based on Matthew 13:24–30, Galatians 6:8–10

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times,” and today’s message will especially relate to the fact that today is World Communion Sunday, a day on which we consider the condition of our world as a whole. We have noted earlier in this series how troubling it is that our world is afflicted with evils, with new atrocities appearing in the headlines every day. We considered why it is that God would allow such evil, and today we consider further what exactly we should do in response to evil. We find important direction in this regard in the parable that we heard in the gospel reading this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The parable read today from the gospel of Matthew is traditionally known as the parable of the wheat and the tares—“tares” being a quaint old word for “weeds.” The parable describes a situation that every farmer or gardener experiences—there are weeds that grow up among the good plants in the field. So what do you do about the weeds? In your garden at home, you can pull the weeds; but in the wheat field described in the parable it was another matter. Wheat plants grow closely together, and the roots of weeds become intertwined with the wheat, so that if you pull up the weeds you pull up wheat also. Thus in the parable there is this conversation:

“The servants said to the householder, ‘Do you want us to go and pull the weeds?’ 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, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned [presumably for fuel] but gather the wheat into my barn.’” [Matthew 13:28-30]

Jesus’ parable directly addresses the situation that we see in the world at large: there is good and bad all in a mix. We see a lot of good. Today in our church close to thirty volunteers will be taking Communion elements to close to forty shut-ins, just one of a great many good actions that members of our church are undertaking all the time. But we also see a lot of bad in the world—everything from creepy clowns to really serious evil, such as the shootings this week in a strip mall in Houston, or the horrendous bombings in Aleppo. Where does all the bad come from? In the parable, the servants 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?” And the householder answered, “An enemy has done this.” [Matt. 13:27-28]

The parable indicates that there are evil powers at work in the world, sowing seeds that would cause weeds to emerge; you need only look at the internet propaganda of the so-called Islamic state, which is aimed at inspiring new terrorists, to see a prime modern example of that. But in the face of all the evil that we see, the central question becomes, What should we do about it? Should we set about pulling weeds?

Pulling the weeds is exactly what many people in Jesus' day expected that the Messiah would be about. When the Messiah arrived, people thought, he would root out the wicked. A standard prayer used by many Pharisees in Jesus' day asked God to please send a Messiah who would "condemn," "smash," and "drive out" the sinners of the world.

This kind of thinking has continued through the centuries. People want to define certain other people as the weeds of the world who need to be rooted out. So the medieval church defined some people as heretics or witches who needed to be exterminated; but the same pattern has continued into modern times. Pol Pot's Cambodia defined two million Cambodians as weeds who had to be rooted out in order to purify society. Or just a week ago, a prominent writer in Jordan, Nahed Hattar, who had caused a furor by posting a cartoon that criticized the terrorist view of God and heaven, was shot dead by a Salafist imam. In the radical Islamist view, Hattar was a weed to be pulled.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus sharply critiques such behavior centuries in the advance. "Do you want us to go and pull the weeds?" the servants ask. "No," replies the householder [Matt. 13:28-29]; for they will end up pulling the wheat as well and will create a mess. We are not the ones to judge between the wheat and the tares. And yet we continue to see endless examples, even among Christians, of people wanting to pass spiritual judgment on others.

Tony Perkins, a conservative evangelical who heads an entity called the Family Research Council, has proclaimed in the past that natural disasters in America (such as floods and tornadoes) are God's wrath, poured out because of gay marriage and abortion. This August, during the massive flooding in Louisiana, his driveway was under ten feet of water, his house and his cars were flooded, and his family had to be rescued in a canoe.¹ The moral of the story is: be careful before you pronounce what God is angry about.

The reality is that we are all sinners who stand under God's judgment; without the grace of Christ, we each could be defined as a weed needing to be pulled. It is Christ who makes us wheat. So we need to receive the grace and redeeming power of Christ in our own hearts, and when we look at others, we need to leave the judging to God.

The parable thus gives us a clear message about how we should react when we see good and bad all in a mix in human society as a whole. We are to refrain from every inclination to defined some people as wheat and others as weeds, for the two very good reasons noted in the parable:

First, it is often very difficult for us to rightly distinguish between wheat and weed. Around our house Mavis and I have several gardens that contain a lot of perennials. When things start growing in the spring and I go around weeding, often I'll look at a plant and think, "O.K., what is that?" I have found that the best rule of thumb is: When in doubt, don't pull; because what looks right now like a weed might turn out to be a flower. Surely this is true all the more of people. When we look at another person, we cannot know their heart or what they will become; so we need to leave the judgment to God.

The other reason to avoid weed-pulling campaigns among humanity is because if you set about pulling weeds you will damage the wheat. When church leaders in ages past

launched into crusades against supposed heretics, the whole church and lots of good people were seriously hurt in the end. Or today, the Islamic State is driven by the idea of cleansing society of unbelievers. Human efforts at weed-pulling have always created a lot of damage. So the counsel of Jesus' parable is sound—just let the wheat and the weeds grow together. Accept the fact that humanity is a motley looking field, where good and bad are mixed up in confusing fashion, just as it is within the individual human soul, where positives and negatives are all in a mix. We need to let the whole field grow in the light of God's grace, and leave the final judgment to God.

But does this then mean that we should not try to discern between good and evil, and that we should never take any action against wrongdoers, but should just let evil grow unchecked until the Day of Judgment? We push the parable too far if we try to make it say that courtroom judges should never pass judgment on criminals or that nations should never try to check the exploits of evildoers or that people cannot tell the difference between good and evil. The Scriptures call us to choose the good and to turn from evil, and the Bible supports rule of law to restrain evil. The point of Jesus' parable is to bring us to the right spiritual attitude when we look at a world at large in which good and bad are all in a mix, and it leads us finally to three positive principles for action:

First, nurture the whole field. The servants in the parable were to keep nurturing the entire field until the day of harvest. So as a church, we reach out in mission to everyone; we share the grace of Christ everywhere and let God's purposes unfold.

Secondly, don't fret over the negatives; concentrate on the good that is growing. In the parable, the servants get all concerned about the weeds, and in the world today, people often get fixated on all the negatives and worry that the bad elements in the world are going to overwhelm the good. But the message of the parable is—God is in charge of the field, and there is a lot of good that is growing; so keep working for the kingdom, keep sowing good seed, rejoice in the good that is unfolding right now, and look toward the harvest. As Paul said in his letter to the Galatians, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all" (Gal. 6:9-10)

Finally, the parable urges us to trust in the harvest to come. No matter how confusing or discouraging things may appear at present, the image of harvest says that God is bringing us to a good future. So the parable of weeds in a field connects with last week's story of a boat on a stormy sea. Both images, which come straight out of first century life, portray the troubles and uncertainties and anxieties of life; but in the conclusion of each story—the calm that follows the storm, and the harvest to come—the message is that God is bringing us through trouble to a positive destiny. So we can trust in the Lord with confidence, and we can be a part of how His promises are unfolding today.

ⁱThe Christian Century (Sept. 14, 2016), p. 9.