

The Wheat and the Weeds

Remember last week's parable, how the sower just opened his door, stepped outside, and began to throw seed, wildly, indiscriminately, everywhere, amongst rocks, on the path, in the weeds? Who would try to grow anything like that? Only a farmer foolish with love, a farmer of lavish generosity and extravagant hope. Someone very much like God.

Well, this week's parable is equally outrageous, with a farmer who lets wheat and weeds grow up together, all the way to harvest time, which is crazy! What kind of farmer would do that? One of patience, and trust, and hopeful love, says Jesus, someone very much like God.

Clearly, God does not sow, or grow, or reap, as we would!

Jesus tells a parable: the Country of Heaven is like good seed and bad seed somehow sown together, and when the plants come up, there are these noxious weeds, all entwined with the good wheat. The field hands, afraid and indignant, are eager to rip up and burn the bad stuff, but, says, Jesus, the Country of Heaven is like a farmer who says "Let them be. Let them grow together for now, for in tearing up the one, you'll kill the other, and at harvest time, let me do the sorting."

Now what kind of solution is that? A messy, improper, ambiguous one! The kind that neither the field hands, nor the crowd, nor Matthew and the church he wrote for, nor religious folks down through the ages, nor we ourselves are very comfortable with.

We prefer things black and white and decided. We like rules, clarity, and absolutes, lines drawn in the sand (by us, of course), with everything in its place: weeds over there, wheat over here (that's us, of course). We like things cut and dried, right or wrong, in or out, good or bad, tidy, even, and fair.

But the parable is told by one who blurred the boundaries, crossed the lines, and called into question all the rules. One who lived and taught the messy ambiguity of an extravagant, scandalous love which makes us as nervous as it did Matthew, whose neat, tidy dissection of the parable erases the mystery of its love, making everything come out fair and even and safe, which love just can't ever do.

We want to separate out the weeds, the goats, the darkness and the danger, and to imagine ourselves, always, on the right, bright, safe side of all those lines that divide. We want leaders, neighbors, friends, spouses, children, parents, and pastors who are always good, faithful, and true. You know, all wheat, all the time.

Instead we get this tragic mix of folks who occasionally come through, but too often fall and fail us.

And we want a self, of course, who's all good - kind, generous, and brave, all wheat, all the time. Only we can't seem to keep the weeds out of the gardens of our own souls.

But God, looking down, doesn't see things as we do. God sees a tumble of good soil and bad, good seed and bad, wheat and weeds, all in and among and around us, hopelessly entwined in a rich, fertile mix that God is quite willing to hold, all together, in tenderness and trust, and to love, until growth comes.

And if God can be so compassionate, patient, and trusting towards us all, all that we are, just as we are, why wouldn't we be so towards each other and ourselves? If God can be so gentle towards ours and others' slow, uncertain progress, why would we be so harsh?

I think perhaps that love is born and grows large right where the lines begin to blur, and that it's only there, in the shadows of a boundary erased, in the space where a wall has come down, that love counts for love. I was remembering this poem...

There are only two feelings, love and fear.
There are only two languages, love and fear.
There are only two reasons,
only two activities,
only two procedures,
only two frameworks,
only two results: love and fear.
Love and fear.

It is perhaps over-simple to say that we are mostly about fear, which is ever-eager to rip up and destroy, to banish, burn, shun, and kill anything around us, among us, and even, especially, within us, that we can't understand or control and looks suspiciously like a dangerous enemy or even just a pesky weed.

But God is all about love, which unites, includes, gathers, holds, waits, trusts, and lets be.

There's a rabbinic saying that each of us should have two pockets, each carrying a certain set of words to take out and read as reminders when needed. In the one should be the words, "I am nothing more than dust and ashes." And in the other should be the words, "For me the world was created."

God sees each of us as a masterpiece in the making precious in his sight, a lost child, wandering ever-so-slowly home. And God sees us, together, his church, as a bride, lovely and loveable, even in her soiled and tattered gown. And God sees this whole dear world through the love which will finally redeem it all and restore it to God's heart.

There is a world out there hungry to know its belovedness to God, which we can only tell to others when we've accepted it ourselves, and practiced it with each other.

This parable, in fact, isn't even so much about the wheat and the weeds, the field and the field hands. It's about the farmer, who, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, "is more interested to see things grow than to have for himself a pure, clean, uniformly tidy field."

Each of us is this sad, beautiful mix of shadow and light, of good and not so good, but, still, God loves us perfectly in all our imperfection, and asks us to love ourselves and each other with just that gracious forbearance. If tearing up weeds will kill the wheat, it may even be that the weeds have some value, and that the tender compassion and mercy we bear towards them is the very wheat that God is awaiting from us.

Amen.