

8th Sunday After Pentecost

[Genesis 28.10-19a](#)

[Psalms 139.1-11; 139.23-24](#)

[Romans 8.12-25](#)

[Matthew 13.24-30; 13.36-43](#)

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(Sermon taken from YouTube transcript)

Grace Roots

So first of all, let me say that for the first time in my ministry, I have finally mastered the art of being in two places at once, at two different times at once. It appears, as I look around, as if I am in Wells, Maine, on a Saturday evening. But actually, I'm in Australia on Sunday morning. I love that.

So there's this parable. When we first hear it, and when we hear the explanation, it gives us a little explanation for why it is that there are such bad people in the world, right? I don't know about you. I am a non-violent person, and I am committed to mercy, and yet I confess that there are a couple of people that I think God should just strike with lightning. You know, I think we all have those. In fact, if we were to think about it, we might all think of the same couple of people. The world would be better off without them. God, why don't you just take them out? Jesus' parable, with this explanation, seems to say, well, God has decided to let the good people and bad people work it out, and God will sort it out in the end.

Well, okay, I won't argue with that, but it doesn't take me anywhere. It doesn't really help me. Mostly what it does, in fact, is get me more involved in trying to judge other people, even though it's encouraging me not to. Now, there's a little moral lesson in there, which is that, at the end, the angels are going to separate out the wheat from the weeds, so you want to be a good person so that you end up going to heaven instead of hell. Okay, well, there's a lesson. But you know what? I already know that. I'm already trying to be a good person, and sometimes it's hard because, well, to use Jesus' image, the good and the bad in me are all kind of tangled up together, and it's really hard for me to tell what's what and to separate them out. Sometimes it seems, in fact, like they're all the same thing.

I'll do a good deed for somebody, and I do it partly because I'm kind and generous and thoughtful, and I want them to experience blessing. I also do it because I want them to like me. There are these selfish motives mixed in with my good motives. And when I think about these weeds and wheat, I think about this meadow that's right outside our house, a small field that's full of flowers and grasses and stuff. It looks kind of like these backgrounds. There's some nice stuff in there, but there's also bittersweet, which is this invasive vine that will grow up and strangle a 60-foot tree and pull it down. It's lethal stuff.

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And so I'm out there all the time pulling this bittersweet. The thing with bittersweet is that there's a little tiny plant and this big, huge root, and it goes way out there. It stretches out for meters and meters. When you start hauling it up, you haul all sorts of stuff up. And if you've ever done any gardening, you know that you can't just blast through your garden and yank out the weeds because, like the landowner says in the parable, if you pull out the weeds, you uproot the wheat too.

So how does this story help me? Well, the first thing that helps me is this: if I skip the explanation, it's sort of a common, not liturgical but literary, device of the gospel writers to insert editorial comments into their gospels. A lot of times what they do is put those comments in the lips of Jesus, as if he said those things. But this is Matthew, not Jesus, with that explanation. Partly, I think, because I know that a good storyteller never explains their stories, right? A good comedian doesn't explain their jokes. If the joke wasn't funny, the explanation isn't going to be even funnier. You just go to the next thing. But more to the point, that explanation actually encourages me to start dividing people into weeds and wheat, because I anticipate the angels are going to do that. So there's this good and bad. Maybe Jesus is thinking of something different.

The thing about a parable is that it's not just a story with a moral. It's not just a euphemism. It's not a way of saying this by saying that, because if Jesus really wanted to say that, he would have just said that. A parable is a story that enters into our imagination beneath the level of our conscious, rational analysis and makes stuff happen. It doesn't necessarily explain anything; usually, it does the opposite. A good parable raises questions. It creates a paradox. It invites us to step aside from our usual accepted beliefs and see things from a different perspective. That's what the para in parable means: alongside. We step aside to a different perspective and see things anew, and that new way of seeing things usually involves a paradox.

And here's the paradox I see in this story. On the one hand, Jesus wants me to live with love, and that means that I am continually asking myself: am I giving and receiving love, or something else? So I'm discerning. Is it love, or is it something else? Essentially, is it wheat, or is it weeds? Is it fruitful, or is it something that chokes off the fruitfulness of love in my life? So on the one hand, Jesus is inviting me to discern between good and evil. At the same time, part of what this parable is saying is, don't bother. Don't concern yourself with judging between good and evil, for several reasons. One is, you don't know. I think I know what's good, but I'm pretty mixed up. I think I know what evil is, but sometimes my perspective isn't all that good because I'm partly evil myself, so my perspective is warped. I can't even tell what's good and what's evil in myself, let alone in other people.

Part of what's going on in this parable is that it's not just about those people, those bad people, as opposed to us good people. Like that prayer said, we think we're the wheat. It's also not about the present and the future. The way Jesus explains the story is that, at the end times, the angels will sort out, on the day of harvest, between the wheat and the weeds. But I think this is a story that's not just about now and later. It's also a story about the visible world that I see and the invisible world that I don't see. And it's not that that sorting out is going to happen later. It's happening right now, but in a realm that I can't see. I am not privy to the real difference between good and evil, partly because they are pretty mixed up. The roots of good and evil are tangled up not only in me, but in reality.

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You've probably heard a story, something like many stories that we've heard. There's a man who lived in a kingdom long ago and far away, kind of like Pastor Steve, who is preaching to you from long ago Saturday night and far away in the United States. This man had a horse, and it was a beautiful horse, and everybody in the village said, "You're a lucky man." But the horse ran away, and everybody in the village said, "Oh, that's bad luck." Then the horse came back and brought with it another horse, a beautiful stallion, and everybody said, "Oh, that's good." But the stallion was wild and destructive and hard to manage, and it made the man's life miserable, and everybody said, "Oh, that's bad." But the man was good with horses, and he could train that horse. He could break that horse and train it, and everybody said, "Oh, you're a lucky man." But in the course of training the horse, the horse threw him, and he broke his leg, and everybody said, "Oh, that's too bad." Then the king came along and gathered every able-bodied man to go fight in a war that the king was sure to lose, and everybody said, "Ooh, that's bad." But the man couldn't fight in the war because his leg was broken. Everybody said, "Oh, you're a lucky man."

You've probably heard stories like that, right, in which something that appears to be good turns out maybe not to be, and something that seems bad turns out not to be. Now, part of that is because things go the way they go, and stuff happens that we don't know about. It's also because we are not aware of the mystery of grace. This is not just a story about how we shouldn't judge other people, but how we can't, because in fact, if you do something awful, I do not know what made you do that awful thing. Remember, in the parable, it's an enemy who comes and sows those seeds of the weeds. They're not natural to that field. The evil that's in us isn't natural to us. It comes from our wounds and our fears. And when somebody does something awful, I cannot judge what wounds they're bearing, what fears they're wrestling with. And maybe what's going on inside them is so awful that, for them to have done something as bad as they did, is actually pretty good for them. They could have done something much worse. I don't know that. I don't know what they're wrestling with.

But I think it goes even deeper than that, and it has to do with what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans, when he talks about the difference between living by the spirit and living by the flesh. For 2,000 years, I think we have tragically misinterpreted that scripture, as if what Paul is saying is that there's the spiritual, and that's good, and there's the physical, and that's different, and that's bad. And so everything that's spiritual is good, and everything that's of the flesh is bad. Of course, we associate the flesh with things like women, because women are judged according to their bodies, so women are a little less righteous than men. And we've decided that some physical pleasures are bad, like sex and chocolate, right? That's why we talk about sinful desserts, because all of these physical pleasures are bad. Paul is not talking about any of that.

He's not distinguishing between spiritual and physical because, in fact, they're the same thing. The spiritual is the physical. The Word is made flesh. What Paul is talking about is that, in my experience, I am this body. I am this bundle of flesh here, and I'm contained and defined and limited by this flesh. This is me, and each one of those other bundles is you, and we're separate, and no matter how close we get, we're two separate things. And Paul says that's an illusion. We look like we're separate, but we are actually distinct fingers of the same hand. We're all part of a larger living organism. We're

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members of the body of Christ, and the eye can't say to the hand, I don't need you because you're not an eye. You're not part of me. We are part of one another.

Because God is infinite, that means there's nothing outside of God. So the entire created universe is inside God, which means God is inside of all of us. No matter how awful the person, God is in that person, and that person is God's beloved. And no matter how awful the things are in my life, God is present in that, and I can't judge it as being purely good or bad, because no matter how good and bad it is, God is there.

Since we're worshipping sort of side by side here with Hildegard of Bingen, I'm thinking of something that Hildegard wrote once when she said, "Humanity, take a good look at yourself. Inside you've got heaven and earth and all of creation. You are a world. Everything is hidden in you." Part of what that means to me is that, as much as I am tempted to judge either other people or parts of myself or even a situation that I'm in, I can't rely on my judgment because God is present in that. And because of that, grace is possible no matter what. No matter how awful the person, no matter how terrible the situation, no matter how awful I feel about that part of myself, God is present, and that means that grace is possible and anything can happen.

And my work is, yes, in that paradox, to continue to discern what is fruitful in my life. How am I giving and receiving love, and what are the things that choke off that love that I need to get rid of and do not work? But at the same time, my work is to live in the paradox in which I know that God, not I, but God, is the one who is sorting out what's good and what's bad, and to trust that this will turn out good because it's in God's hands. Even the weeds are full of God's life, and God is always giving life and giving blessing. And part of what it means when Paul says to live in the spirit is to live in that mindfulness that I am part of God, and other people are part of God, and all of creation and everything that's happening is part of God. And therefore, as Jacob said when he awoke from his dream, God is in this place, and I didn't know it.

My rational, analyzing mind is not capable of knowing that. But that part of me that is not sorting out good and evil, but simply being present, allowing God to be present, that part knows that God is here. And when I live in the spirit, when I live in trust of that God who has searched me, like the psalm says, who knows what's going on in me before I even know, when I live in trust that God holds everything and is at work in ways that I can't see and will never know, then instead of judging and ripping out the weeds from among the wheat, my job is simply to find the wheat among the weeds. And when I live in that trust, I discover that I am indeed living with more love and more generosity, and it bears fruit. For that, I give thanks. Will you pray with me?

God, you know better than we do that our hearts are full of both good and evil, and the roots of both are tangled together. Nourish what is good in us. Strengthen the wheat by your Spirit. Help us to trust your grace, that by the mystery of your working in us and in others and in all the world, your will shall be done. God, help us to trust. Help us to be mindful of your presence and listen for your voice, and, surrendering everything to your love, to live in harmony with your grace. Amen.