

Live Together in God's Mercy **Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

The parable of planted weeds!

Today's scripture reading is one of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God. Just like other parables of the kingdom of God, the story begins with the same phrase, "the kingdom of heaven is like...!" "The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field." However, when the seed began to grow, there were weeds growing among the wheat. "The farmhands came to the farmer and said, 'Master, that was clean seed you planted, wasn't it? Where did these weeds come from?' 'Some enemy did this,' he replied. When the servants asked, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?," he ordered "let both grow together until harvest time." Remember this is the parable of the kingdom of God. When you think of the kingdom of God, what images comes to your heart? Nice and clean... Pure and holy! There is no place for evil and sin. So, the master's words, "Let them grow together until harvest time" is puzzling because it sounds like the master allows evil to grow.

At the same time, this parable captures the truth of life. "When the plants came up, then the weeds appeared as well." Yes. Good and evil grow together in life. Think of your lives or look at your neighbors. There is no one who is pure good or pure evil. Thomas Jefferson, our honored forefather, was a slave owner. Throughout his life, he held hundreds of enslaved individuals on his plantation in Virginia, and he did not take significant action to abolish the institution of slavery during his time in public office. He expressed conflicting views on slavery, even acknowledging its moral wrongs, but he did not take bold steps to end it during his political career. Our lives are a mosaic of good and evil and we cannot simply separate right from wrong, good from evil in our world. Many years ago, while taking a Christian ethics course, I read an article about a teenage boy who was caught by police while selling drugs. Was he a bad person? He was born to an extremely poor family and lived in a slum. His mother and her boyfriend were drug addicts and wanted him to bring home money, otherwise, they would send his younger sister into prostitution. To protect his sister, this boy sold drugs, the only way he knew of to make money in his town. Is he a bad boy? Good and evil often grow together in life.

We may clearly distinguish good from evil in traditional Western movies like 'Rio Bravo' or 'A Fistful of Dollars.' In reality, we cannot say with certainty, "this is good, that is evil." One of the problems I had when I went out to collect wild herbs with my father was that I wasn't always sure which one was the desired herb and which was a weed. My father showed me the leaves of the herb, but on the mountain where numerous plants grow, everything looked the same to me. We don't always know what we are looking at, for good and evil are always intertwined. "When the plants came up, then the weeds appeared as well."

Unfortunately, we tend to oversimplify our world, dividing everything up into sides, good and evil. Who is good? No matter which side we are on, we tend to see our side as good and the other as evil. As I shared last week, I really enjoyed my visit to Korea. Everything looked so familiar and comforting to me. But there is one thing that bothered me a lot. While I walked on the streets, I could see many political banners. As you can guess, most of the banners sarcastically blamed another political party. I know that politicians always blame others as if it is their primary job to do so, but there used to be some level of decorum and manners 13 years ago. Almost all of the political catch phrases I saw have become more aggressive and blunt. I could feel the polarization of Korean society.

The situation we live in here is no difference. As the 2024 election approaches, I bet we will hear more dividing words from politicians. Many surveys have shown that increasing numbers of Republicans and Democrats now view each other, not simply as opponents but as malevolent enemies, a danger to the nation.¹ I believe you are familiar with the expression, “axis of evil.” As we label others as evil, we become less hesitant to use deadly forces against that evil. In many cases, our attempts to eradicate evil often become evil in themselves. In the 1990s, strict economic sanctions against Iraq were imposed to thwart Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions. We may not recognize it, but economic sanction is a deadly weapon just like “Weapons of Mass Destruction.” During that period, the economic sanctions against Iraq led to the deaths of 500,000 children age five and under.² Humanitarian crises can never be justified. Think of the witch hunts in Salem or the inquisition of the Middle ages. Whenever we, Christians, try to eradicate evil in the name of our religious purity, we often end up with being cruel and evil ourselves.

Let them grow together until harvest time!

“Let them grow together until harvest time,” said the farmer. Good and evil, evil and good, they grow together in reality and we have to admit that we are incapable of clearly separating good from evil. We don’t know enough. We don’t care enough to judge rightly. God alone is wise enough to know good and evil. We have to accept that we are not God to judge. We are not God to save the world. No matter how good we are, we also have weeds planted in our souls and we also need God’s mercy. “Let them grow together until harvest time,” said the master and this is actually good news for us.

As we watch the news, we often feel that evil is winning. The Ukraine War continues. The madness of gun shootings never stops. While the Covid-19 pandemic comes to an end, a racism pandemic is still going on with no foreseeable end in sight. Drug overdose deaths keep rising. Yes. We see overgrown weeds and we feel like we are losing the battle.

But remember God is the God of the harvest and in the end, evil will be cut down so that goodness may flourish! In fact, evil has done its worst and has already failed. David Buttirck said, “Evil has set up a cross and torn down a corpse, crucifying all that was good and true and beautiful. But God was still God, and in God’s power Christ Jesus was raised up again... In Christ, we know that goodness will rise again in an eternal harvesttime.” Yes. “in our world the best things get crucified, but they rise again!” We know that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God. So don’t be discouraged even though evil seems to be growing.

Along with Nelson Mandela, bishop Desmond Tutu fought to end apartheid in South Africa. Do you know how long Bishop Desmond Tutu had to struggle against apartheid in South Africa? It took almost four decades. Not four years but four decades! But he never lost hope. Rather he wrote beautiful words. “Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Victory is ours through Him who loved us.” Because he believed that evil would eventually be cut down and the righteous would shine like the sun in God’s kin-dom, he could continue his work without losing hope and overcome evil with goodness and hatred with love! The time for harvest is surely coming!

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¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-political-opponents-became-enemies-in-the-u-s>

² <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11158-020-09483-z#Fn2>

Meanwhile, what do we need to do with our ambiguous lives in which good and evil grow together? The phrase, “Let them grow together until harvest time,” does not mean that we ignore sin and evil. Rather, we overpower it; we counteract it with love, not judgment. We must accept that ultimate judgment is God’s job and not ours. Instead of labeling others as evil persons and trying to pull them out, we trust that God is still in charge and with faith in our merciful Savior, we welcome all people, and show our hospitality even to those who seem to take advantage of our good intentions and kindness. We are called to grow together in God’s mercy and tend the garden in our hearts and the world. So let us grow together until harvest time. Amen.