

**A WEEDY PROBLEM**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 7A, Proper 11-Mt 13:24-30, 36-43*  
LPC, 7/23/17

One of the oldest and most enduring problems in Christianity is the problem of evil. The 25-cent seminary word for this problem is called theodicy, and it has been around from the very beginning.

The ancient Romans didn't have this problem. They had a pantheon of selfish gods and goddesses interfering capriciously in the affairs of humankind. At least you didn't have to wonder where all the bad stuff came from. The Romans were first mystified by the Jews, who taught that the one God loves and covenants with humans, and then still more by Christians who believed this loving God was in the process of redeeming creation.

Unlike the Romans Christian theologians had to address the problem: If God is good and all-powerful, why is there evil in the world? Plotinus, Augustine, Irenaeus and Origen, and so has every Christian theologian worth his or her salt since then have tried to answer this question. You would think after two thousand years an adequate explanation might have emerged.

Unfortunately theories, which are logical and rational, don't seem to carry a lot of comfort for people who are really suffering. People who are suffering from the evil in the world don't need explanations, they need presence and redemption. Jesus knew this.

The fact of the matter is that scripture itself addresses the issue explicitly. The parable told by Jesus in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is where this happens.

This is the story: A farmer sows good wheat seed, but when he's not looking his enemy secretly over seeds the same field with noxious plants. We understand these weeds to be a plant called darnel, a plant at best useless and at worst poisonous, which closely resembles wheat when immature. The farmer dissuades his workers from removing the darnel until harvest time, lest in the process of weeding they uproot the wheat.

When asked, Jesus helpfully supplies the interpretation to this parable: The farmer is Jesus himself, the enemy is Satan. Jesus has sown goodness, but the devil has sown evil. The evil is allowed to coexist with the good until "harvest time," the "end of the age," a moment determined by God alone, and at that point, evil will be destroyed once and for all and good will prevail and "shine like the sun."

The parable thus provides *an* answer to the question of why there is evil in the world if God is so good. The simplest answer is that God and God's goodness will triumph but it's not yet time. To root out the evil before its time could destroy the good along with the bad.

There are other lessons that can be drawn, based on the resemblance between the good and bad plants: the wheat and the darnel. During the current age, while what Jesus has sown in the world is still growing, it is extremely difficult to make a completely reliable distinction between what is good and what is evil. In our zeal to root out evil, we run the risk of destroying something good, "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," so to speak.

Good and evil are frequently so closely interwoven in human endeavor that doing a precise excision of the evil can be nearly impossible and may do as much harm as good: as when removal of a brain tumor renders the patient vegetative.

The bottom line of the story is to tell Christians: be patient. God will sort it all out in the fullness of time. All will be well and all will be well and all manner of things shall be well.

Does this mean that we are to be passive when we observe evil at work in the world? Do we just tend our own garden, so to speak, and leave everything else to God? No, of course not.

In the context of my last rector's column about the Trinity I mentioned that while models of the Holy Trinity can help us understand what God is like, nearly all of them will lead to heresy if taken to extremes. The same can be said of parables like this one. Jesus told parables to illustrate particular points. Jesus told parables so that people of varying intelligence might be able to understand what the kingdom of God is like. A parable addresses a particular question; it does not provide a comprehensive theology or ethical system.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds addresses the question of how God can permit evil to coexist with God's good in the world. The directive to the field hands not to pull out the weeds until the harvest is not an instruction to Jesus' disciples to refrain from actively working against evil in the world.

Once again, a single Bible passage does not provide a transferable, universally applicable model for human behavior in every situation. This passage does provide us of one vision of the kingdom of God, which we, as followers of Jesus, try to serve in whatever we do. In some instances serving the kingdom of God will require us to restrain ourselves from action and be patient, awaiting God's disposition of the situation. In others in order to serve the kingdom of God we need to act decisively.

Our standard is always the kingdom of God, God's consummation and perfection of creation, were all that is good finally shines like the sun and that which is evil is cast into fire. The kingdom of God, as I frequently say, based on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, is healing, feeding, forgiving, loving and justice.

All these things are active in the world now, despite the weeds. All these things will be perfected in the fullness of time. In the meantime we can pretty much assume there will be weeds. Sometimes the weeds may bother us. Sometimes, the weeds will *be* us. When we ourselves are weedy, we will find ourselves grateful that God is not anxious to weed us out right away.