

Genesis 28:10-19a  
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-34

Romans 8:12-25  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

When I was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey back in the 70s, I think I was the only student there who had an agricultural background. During the first Christmas break, I came back with some corn cobs, got up in the middle of the night, and switched out the toilet paper a corn cob. Later that morning, I woke up to someone yelling, “Meester!” One day, while in seminary, some friends and I were having a discussion about our depictions of heaven. One friend said it would be a tropical beach with beautiful women. I’m not going to comment on that. Another friend, who grew up in New York City, said heaven for him was a busy urban center. I will comment on that—not my idea of heaven. My idea of heaven—which I am sure many people would think is strange—was that of seeing miles and miles of golden wheat fields right before the harvest. Vast vistas of gold with the wind creating ocean like waves across the fields. However, there always seems to be some green weeds ruining the golden vista, ruining the scene like pollution floating on an ocean wave. Our parable speaks to what to do with that green weed.

In Jesus parable, the farmer’s servants see the green weeds in the wheat and ask the farmer if he wanted them to go out and pull out the weeds. The weed here was the bearded darnel and it was a devil of a weed. In the Bible it was called “tares.” The roots of the bearded darnel surround the roots of the wheat, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water like any other weed. But there was something even more concerning about the bearded darnel. The seeds of the bearded darnel were poisonous. They could cause everything from hallucinations to death. So it was important to separate the wheat from the bearded darnel. But not until harvest time. The farmer said

no to pulling the weeds, because the servants might pull out some wheat with the weed, their roots being intertwined. Thus, as the farmer said, wait until the harvest

Jesus acknowledges the reality of evil. Some people believe there is a devil, like the enemy in this parable, and this devil, or Satan, is the source of evil in the world. Others may not believe in a literal Satan, but that does not deny the presence of evil in the world. Evil exists within human institutions and structural realities in our world. One cannot deny the reality of evil in the world. As one pastor points out, evil is present everywhere. Sometimes our own lives are infested with weeds like the farmer's field. The apostle Paul admitted that when he declared, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." In AA or Alanon the First Step confesses, "We are powerless over alcohol and our lives have become unmanageable." And it reveals the reality of the church. There are weeds as well as wheat "in the pews." Sometimes our jobs can feel like they are weed infested. Maybe it is the middle manager who is glad for the company's big profits, but is not sure about the bookkeeping behind them. Maybe it is a teacher facing a clique of parents whose well-meaning criticism chokes out his creativity and care for his students. Maybe it is the lawyer who is asked to look the other way for the "good of the firm." Evil infests our communities and evil infests our churches.

Our question is like the question of the farmer's servants: What to do about the evil in the world? Are we to pull out the weeds, pull out the evil in the world? Do you want us to remove the evil from the church, from our community, from our society, from our world?

One woman, a master gardener, transplanted some flowers from her garden into her daughter's front yard. Two days later, she was back, frantically digging up the same

plants. "I made a mistake," she said, sweat dripping from her eighty-year-old face. "These are weeds, not the flowers I intended!" She told her granddaughter, "Quick, give me a hand before your mother gets home!" This story illustrates the challenge of distinguishing the weed from the flower, the good from the bad. The bearded darnel I mentioned earlier looked very much like wheat. It wasn't until harvest time that one could distinguish the bearded darnel from the wheat. It is not easy to distinguish between the good and the bad. We dare not judge for God.

Jesus' parable warns us against a rush to judge. We cannot always tell what is a good plant and what is not. Do we really know God's mind? Are we truly qualified to judge for God? I don't think the world needs any more judges for God. Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka, declares that the deaths of our soldiers are due to our nations tolerance of homosexual lifestyles. Pastor John Hagee declared that Hurricane Katrina was God's judgment against the city of New Orleans for there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came. God does not need any more judges, for God does not want any of us to judge.

In our rush to judge, we may judge wrongly. One study of convicted death row inmates indicates that over 300 people over three decades were wrongly convicted. We may question that study. But over that same time 117 people were legally exonerated. It illustrates that we must be careful when we judge, for sometimes we pull out the wheat when we pull out the tares.

That does not mean the church cannot do anything about evil or corruption within the church. Stories of church members embezzling mission money, child sexual abuse

within the church, church leaders accused of various crimes. Unfortunately, they happen. And when they do, the church must act, but it must act slowly and with caution.

As Tom Long points out, this parable frees us from the burden of having to “play God and set things right all by ourselves.” This parable, and other sayings by Jesus, make it clear that God is the judge. The slaves are assured that they can let the weeds grow. The weeds will not choke out the wheat. The weeds will be destroyed in due time at the harvest and the success of the harvest is sure. Harvest was a metaphor for the last judgment, and it is at the last judgment that God will separate the tares from the wheat, the weeds from the wheat, the evil from the good. Let God do God’s work in God’s good time. It is not for us to “play God and set things right all by ourselves.”.

Thanks be to God  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.