

Pentecost 7, 7.19.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 44:6-8; Ps 86:11-17; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

“Of Good and Evil in the World”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. In today’s gospel, Jesus tells another parable about sowing good seed, seeds of grace, in the world. This parable also gives us a way of understanding the ongoing reality of evil in the world.

In this parable, the field is the world into which Jesus sows good seed, and the evil enemy, the devil, also sows seeds of evil. Jesus says the good seeds become children of the kingdom, while the evil seeds become children of the evil one. This parable helps us understand the persistence of not only evil within the world, but also evil within each of us. As today’s psalm suggests, we have divided hearts, hearts with both good and evil.

Anyone who has ever gardened will readily understand the problem and persistence of weeds. For many years my wife and I had a garden in Japan, and it required diligent care and constant weeding. If only we could put the weeds in just one section, gardening would be a lot easier, but it doesn’t work like that. Weeds always have a way threatening everything in the garden.

Jesus’ parable also suggests other sayings (Matthew 5:45), like God “*makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*” God’s grace is showered upon the entire garden, upon the entire world. Jesus reminds his listeners and us, however, that there will be a time of both harvest and judgment, a time of separating the good wheat from the evil weeds.

Today’s parable is also very timely, because it helps us understand the persistence of systemic evil and sin in the world. Jesus identifies the field as the world, and also says that this world belongs to the one who sows the good seed. The world is God’s and Jesus continues to sow good seed, even as evil grows alongside the good seed.

This parable also contains echoes of the Genesis account of the Fall of humanity in the garden. The garden was created good, and the first humans were without sin. In the Genesis story, the seeds of evil and rebellion against God were planted into the human heart and continue to reside in our hearts. The biblical witness is trying to tell us that the problem of human sin and the persistence of evil are deeply rooted in the world and in the human heart. We might say that sin and evil is systemic to our very core as human beings. We have divided hearts. As Paul writes in Romans

(7:19-20), *“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”* Paul is describing a heart divided by good and evil, and Jesus is describing a world divided by good and evil.

A few years ago, attended an interfaith meeting of clergy in which we discussed the problems of systemic evil in our world. At this meeting we addressed issues of racism, of housing inequity, ongoing ethnic discrimination, and the assumed cultural privilege for people of a “white” complexion. During our discussions, one of the clergy in the group, a woman, said in a sort of exasperated way, “You know, we never really talk about the reality of sin in our discussions about systemic evil in the world.” Her comment was duly noted and the discussion moved on. However, I remember thinking that she was right. The problem of sin is so deeply rooted in our hearts that we scarcely give it a second thought. As we talk righteously, and at times a bit self-righteously, about the need for social justice and change, we also need to struggle with that deeply rooted weed called “sin” that divides our hearts. Until we recognize our own captivity to sin, we will be unable to make true and lasting change happen in ourselves, and our world.

Too often our high-minded Enlightenment tradition gets the better of us and we talk and act as if we could make the world better solely by ourselves, solely by our noble and highly rational thought. When we treat problems of evil and sin as solvable only by human effort, we underestimate the seriousness of the problem and how deeply rooted the problems of sin and evil are in the world and in ourselves.

Even if one is not a Christian, Jesus’ parable is worth serious consideration because it opens up the possibility that, regarding evil, we are in over our heads. The world is thoroughly filled with weeds. The world is thoroughly filled with sin and evil. The good news of Jesus’ parable is that the world is also filled with the good seed of God’s grace! The good news is that God continues to shower grace upon the world.

Like Paul who knew the good he wanted to do, but was unable to do it because of sin, so too, we must recognize good and evil, grace and sin, within ourselves. Jesus’ parable about the wheat and the weeds should make us pause and realize that we all have both wheat and weeds within us. We have both the potential for both good and for evil.

In Holy Baptism there is that moment when the pastor asks the one to be baptized, or the parents and sponsors, three questions - if they renounce the forces of evil, the devil, and the power of sin in

the world. These three ancient baptismal questions are meant to encourage us to choose life, to choose God's grace in the midst of sin and evil within us, and the world. In Holy Baptism, we are finally able to renounce sin and evil because God's grace has also been poured into our hearts.

Only the good seed of God's grace frees us to struggle against our own sinfulness and the evils of injustice and oppression in the world. Any struggle with sin and the systemic evil of the world must start by calling upon the good seed of God's grace within each of us. Paul states this contrast very clearly in today's reading, "*if you live according to the flesh you will die; but by the Spirit...you will live.*"

If we want to live, and if we want our world to thrive, then we must look squarely at the reality of sin in our divided hearts. Sin and evil are not someone else's problems. Sin and evil are not forensic problems that we can remove from the world without first admitting that we are organically part of the problem. "*If you live according to the flesh you will die; but by the Spirit...you will live.*"

Freedom, true freedom from sin, begins with a daily renewal of our baptisms. Daily do we remember that we have been baptized and the good seed of God's grace already dwells within us? Daily do we renounce the forces of evil and sin within us, so we can live courageously in the world for others? Martin Luther wrote of baptism as a garment that we are to wear daily. Do we begin each day putting on the garment of baptism by praying, "Lord, I am baptized; help me again today to renounce sin and evil. Lord, surround me with your grace again today and dwell in my heart. Lord, help me to do good in this world."

The good news is that the good seed of God's grace already dwells within us. Grace frees us when we rely upon it. We become children of God and heirs to the kingdom with Christ when we rely upon the good seed of grace within us. As Isaiah writes, "*You are my witnesses!*" Daily, when we rely upon the seed of God's grace within us, we become witnesses for good in a world that is often marred by death and evil.

Psalm 86 reads, "*Give me an undivided heart to revere your name.*" Yet our hearts remain divided! Our hearts are divided by a desire to do good and the reality of evil that prevents us from doing good. Our hearts are divided by worry and anxiety, by politics and nationalism, by many commitments to family, work, and community. When left divided, the weeds of evil can choke us, preventing the seeds of grace from bearing the fruits justice, mercy, and love for our neighbor and the world.

We long for systemic change in our world. We know that all human beings are sisters and brothers. We know that no matter the color of our skin we are all created and loved by God, recipients of grace, and heirs of the kingdom. We know the good we should do, but our hearts are divided by hatreds, by racism, by sinful pride that makes us think we know better. We think we can find a way out of the labyrinth of sin and evil alone, and yet again and again, our good intentions sputter and come to nothing. Daily the weeds choke the good seed and we go to bed weary and tired from our struggle with evil.

The good news is that God has sown good seed into our hearts, but we must care for our hearts and the seeds of God's grace. Return to God daily in prayer. Wear the garment of baptism and ask for God's help in renouncing sin and evil. Ask God for an undivided heart to do good in this world. The way to ending division, the way to unity in our communities and in the world begins with unity in our hearts.

O Lord, give me an undivided heart. O Lord, grant me seeds of grace again today. O Lord, let me be good seed, seeds of grace in this world. Amen.