
The beauty of weeds
Martin Grove United Church,
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 8:12-25 and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Sometimes I wish life was more like in movies. Not only would I have a much cooler car, but the line between good and evil would be much more clear. In the *Star Wars* movies for example, it's pretty easy to know who the good guys and the bad guys are - you can tell by either the clothes or the music, even if you've totally lost the plot. If the music changes to a minor key, whoever has just walked onto the screen is "bad".

Nice and simple, right?

In *The Wizard of Oz* it's fairly straight-forward too. Somehow we all know that "Glinda the Good" is a good character without being told! And we can be pretty sure what to make of "The Wicked Witch of the West" too. It seems that when Dorothy left Kansas, the film changed from black-and-white to colour while the morality switched from colour to black-and-white. In Kansas, normal life contained good and bad together. But in the Land of Oz - Good is good and bad is bad. Mind you, we were misled about the Wizard himself. We were led to believe he was an amazing person only to discover he was really a nobody. Sorry - I hope I didn't spoil the ending for anyone. But with the exception of the Wizard - and perhaps Dorothy herself - good and evil are easy to figure out in the *Wizard of Oz* story.

Today's gospel text is a lot like that too. The players in the parable are divided into two distinct groups. The good and the evil, and to be honest, that makes it harder for us to relate to the story. There are just too many references to things that I can't embrace - or perhaps I just don't understand. I can't embrace a God who would pitch people in the trash. I don't understand how God decides not to intervene in human affairs until the end days, but the Devil is free to intervene at will. I can't understand why good people should suffer because God refuses to act now on our behalf. I don't see how justice deferred is actually justice at all.

In the words of Gary DeLashmutt, "Does it bother you that Jesus distills all of

humanity into two groups? Does it offend you that he names these two groups 'the descendants of the kingdom' and 'the descendants of the evil one'? What a simplistic and bigoted description! Here is Jesus the 'binary bigot' who desperately needs diversity training!"

If you have troubles with the notion of an apocalyptic God, you are not alone. The notion that I might be a child of the Devil and sent to the fires of eternity is not very compelling, to say the least. I am grateful that this parable is only found in the gospel of Matthew and not in the other standard gospels. It relieves me that most biblical scholars consider this parable to be the words of an early Christian community, not the words of Jesus. So, what is this parable about anyway?

The fog of strangeness in this text lifts somewhat when we recall Matthew's basic take on the whole Jesus project. Although the early Christian venture was made up of different groups, including Jewish and non-Jewish people, scholars think that Matthew was writing to an exclusively Jewish community. For Matthew, Jesus was the Jewish messiah. And Matthew inserts Jesus into a particular role in what was called "Jewish Apocalypticism". This was a belief system in which God would intervene and bring ultimate justice to the world at "the end of the age". In Matthew's mind, Jesus was to be God's tool in making this happen. Matthew's text today actually gives a pretty good overview of the whole notion of apocalypticism. The short story is that God creates all of us, good and bad things happen while God is waiting, then God comes and produces a final victory for the "good" team. The "bad" team is sent to eternal punishment. Simple.

Paul's message in Romans reinforces the apocalyptic notion. He refers to the "unbelievable inheritance" we can expect. He instructs us to welcome the delay, as a pregnant woman welcomes her pregnancy. It's pretty obvious that Paul had never been pregnant! Paul clearly sees the benefits of living a spiritual life in the present - but he also looks to a new and different future.

But the parable has more to it than just apocalyptic expectations. If we remove the apocalyptic elements, we are still left with an interesting message. The parable has three phases. In the first phase, the farmer plants seed and the evil one plants weeds. This phase presumably happened long before we were born. In the last phase, the

harvesting and punishment come. This phase is expected long after we are dead. But in the middle phase, we have the wheat and the tares growing together, we have a mixture of good and bad, we have variability, we have variety, we have vitality. We have life! In other words, this is where we come in into the story!

According to scholars, the weeds in the parable are not just any old weeds - they are “bearded darnel”, which is a species of rye-grass which is common in Palestine. What is interesting about the weeds is that when they sprout and start to grow they look just like wheat. The weeds look like wheat until a certain point in their maturation when the heads fill out and then the difference between the tares and wheat is obvious.

To quote the blogger bloomingcactus, “The problem with taking our hoe to the evil weeds of the world is that good and evil sometimes look so much alike. It only becomes clear later.” This parallels our own history. We often cannot easily separate good from bad in the present. The idea of residential schools looked like a good idea when it was first developed, but the whole situation grew into something we now apologize for. Many people thought the “war on terror” seemed like a reasonable plan until the death toll exceeded 100,000 civilians. The US led a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics as a protest against the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Of course, 22 years later the US decided that invading Afghanistan wasn't such a bad idea after all and the US invaded Afghanistan themselves.

I think the evidence is there that it is hard for us to unequivocally separate good from evil in the present. This is clear from some of the historical examples above. But this happens at a personal level too. Carl Jung's view of the human psyche was that we can hold both good and bad natures within ourselves. The good generally resides in our conscious and the bad generally resides in our shadow - our unconscious dark sides. And if you try to separate your conscious and unconscious selves, you will not be a whole human being. And yet, it is still worthwhile to attempt to separate good and evil, we just need to do it with a lot of humility.

It's a bit like taking what we used to call “garbage” and separating it into trash, recycling, and compost. The effort of sorting through our own garbage makes us more aware of what we are doing. To quote bloomingcactus again, “Just as we are learning to

recycle and compost so trash isn't such a big problem, examining our shadow side is healthier than trying to pitch our sins into one big garbage bag. Perhaps this trash and recycling metaphor is a modern translation of wheat and tares. Whether we are talking about weeds or garbage, it is a caution that our quest for purity can lead to wrong ends when we ignore what is within our own souls."

As we move along in life, many things happen to us that we like, things that build us up and strengthen us. And for most of us, many things happen to us that we don't like. Many experiences we have cause us pain, or grief, or loss, or confusion or fear. Sometimes, we want to "weed out" these painful experiences. To grab something by the roots and just rip it out, believing that if we could just get rid of that evil thing, that our lives would be better again. That's a very natural reaction to things in our lives that cause us suffering.

But we can't rip out parts of our lives without at the same time denying our selves, our stories, our reality. The good and the bad grow together, just as the wheat and the weeds grow together in our parable.

What we can do instead with the weeds in our lives is to see them for what they are, to learn from them, to learn about ourselves from those weeds. We can all learn from the weeds in our lives. When we experience loss, we can learn about what is important to us in life. When we experience fear, we can learn how important it is to comfort others. When we experience loneliness, we can learn how important it is to befriend others. We can learn a lot from the weeds in our lives. And then, since weeds are not edible, once we have learned all that we can from those weeds, we can leave the weeds alone to die in God's time, knowing that those weeds have no power over us and so they can remain for the time being without causing us more pain.

When we can do that with the weeds in our own lives, then we might even find that the weeds have a beauty of their own. Find that beauty.

Amen.