
The gift of weeds
Fairview United Church and Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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Based on Romans 8:12-25 and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I don't know if any of you ever feel this way, but sometimes I wish my life was more like it is in movies. For one thing, I would have a much cooler car - electric of course. And I am really drawn to the idea that whatever problem you are facing in life, it will be resolved in a couple of hours.

For example, in the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz* knowing who is good and who is evil is very straight-forward. Hands up all of you who knew instinctively that "Glinda the Good" was good without being told. Hands up all of you who knew that the "Wicked Witch of the West" was evil, again without being told. The morality in the Wizard of Oz story is strikingly blatant and binary. When Dorothy left Kansas, the film changed from black-and-white to colour but at the same time the morality switched from colour to black-and-white. In the Land of Oz - Good is good and evil is evil. Although I suppose 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 Dorothy - both of whom are human visitors who don't belong anyway - in the Land of Oz good and evil are very easy to figure out.

[slide: sowing]

Today's gospel text is a lot like that too. The players in the parable are divided into two distinct group: the good and the evil. Personally, I find that makes the story hard to understand. There are just too many references to things that I can't embrace - or perhaps I just don't get it. I cannot 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 interfere 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 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 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. But in any case, what is this parable about?

The fog of strangeness in this text lifts somewhat when we recall Matthew's basic take on the whole Jesus project. Although the early Jesus venture was made up of different groups, including Jewish and non-Jewish people, scholars agree 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 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 evil things happen for while, 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 this 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. From this we at least conclude that Paul had never been pregnant himself! 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 that many people struggle to appreciate today, I think we are still left with an interesting message. I look at it like this: The parable has three phases. In the first phase, the farmer plants seed and the evil one plants weeds. This phase presumably refers to a time long before you and I were born. In the last phase, the harvesting and

punishment come. This phase refers to a time presumably long after you and I are dead. But in the middle phase, we have the wheat and the weeds growing together, we have a mixture of good and evil, we have variability, we have variety, we have creativity, we have vitality. We have life! In other words, this phase is where we ourselves come into the story! We are the ones who live in the reality of a world where good and evil co-exist.
[slide: Darnell]

According to some scholars, the weeds in the parable are not just any old weeds - they are “bearded darnel”, which is a species of rye-grass common in Palestine. What is interesting about these weeds is that when they sprout and start to grow they look just like wheat. The darnel look like wheat until a certain point in their maturation when the heads fill out and then the difference between the weeds and wheat becomes obvious. Before that stage is reached, you just cannot tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat.
[slide: good and evil]

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 evil in the present. Here are just 3 examples: 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 500,000 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. What we see - what we perceive - in the present is not always what we will see looking back later. I think the evidence is there that it is hard for us to unequivocally separate good from evil in the present.

This happens on a personal level too. I have heard countless stories where people were devastated because they lost a particular job. Losing a job is considered bad, right. But in many cases that job loss led to the development of new skills and a much better professional life. I have spoken with many people in prison who actually grew out of the

experience of incarceration and became caring, loving people in part because of their experiences while incarcerated. Going to prison is considered bad, right? But it can lead to new life too. What appears to be bad today may be seen as good when we look back tomorrow. And regrettably, what appears to be good today may be seen as bad when we look back tomorrow.

[slide: ying yang]

And it's not just that our perceptions change over time. Good and evil coexist at the same time anyway. Carl Jung's view of the human psyche was that we hold both good and evil natures within ourselves. The good generally resides in our conscious and the evil generally resides in our shadow - our unconscious dark side. Jung's theory may explain why it is so hard to eliminate racism. Our conscious selves know that racism is moronic. But our unconscious selves react to "the other" in our midst, and we act out our own racism impulses. If you try to separate your conscious and unconscious selves, you will not be a whole person. But it is vital that we are able to name - even if we cannot separate - the good and evil inside ourselves. And we need to do it with a lot of humility.

[slide: garbage vs sorting]

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 [the parable of] wheat and [weeds]. 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."

[slide: weeds]

If you've been sleeping up to now, here's the moment where you might want to wake up.

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 do not like. Many experiences we have cause us pain, 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 pain and suffering.

But we cannot rip out parts of our lives without at the same time denying our whole selves, our stories, our reality. The good and the evil grow together, just as the wheat and the weeds grow together in our parable. What you might think of as the weeds in your own life are like family members that you don’t really like. It’s not a question of how to *get rid* of them - it’s a question of how to live *with* them.

Weeds - by definition - are not edible, but here’s the good news: they can still be gifts. We need to learn to see the weeds in our own lives as gifts, gifts that we can learn from. We can all learn from the weeds in our own lives. For example, when we experience loss, we can learn what is deeply important to us in life. When we experience fear, we can learn how important it is to comfort and support others. When we experience loneliness, we can learn how important it is to befriend others. The weed of isolation from the pandemic is helping many people today realize what it is that they truly value in life, and that is a real gift. We can learn a lot from the weeds in our lives. And then, once we have learned all that we can from those weeds, we can leave those 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.

Unless you actually live in the Land of Oz, you will find that good and evil are mixed together, in our society, in our churches, and even in our own hearts. But the evil - like weeds - are opportunities for us to grow, as long as we are honest about them. We recently concluded some discussion groups called “Let’s Talk About Racism” where people brought their whole selves and named how the weed of racism impact them personally. Naming the weeds in our lives is like sorting the trash. It takes some effort, it might stink a bit, but in the end, we find that we are more at peace with ourselves.

The weeds in our lives are gifts. Open your heart to learn what you can from the weeds in your own life, and then leave these weeds to die in God’s time.

Amen.