

If last week's Gospel of the Sower, using Star Wars terminology as "A New Hope" this week's Gospel could be called "The Empire Strikes Back"! This is a hard Gospel for me because I want everything to be sorted, and so, when things go wrong, I become a problem solver who wants to make it all right again. But that doesn't always work out as we sometimes painfully know summed in the phrase "no good turn unstoned".

Patient trust in God is one of the things the parable in the gospel reading is all about. The weeds spoken of here in the Gospel were translated as "tares" in some translations. Tares were a ryegrass, a poisonous plant that was widespread in ancient Palestine. In its immature stages it looked almost identical to a young wheat plant. The two could only be easily distinguished when the plants reached the seed-bearing stage — as scripture says, "you will know them by their fruit."

The servants of the master farmer, in the parable told by Jesus, were shocked to find tares growing in the field sown with the master's good seed. They must have been first-children because in the face of this abomination caused, we are told (by the enemy of the master) the servants want to immediately fix the problem by tearing out the weeds and make things right again. But the master says, "No, wait, be patient; let's not cause any collateral damage; it will all get sorted out at the harvest."

Jesus, in the words of the master, is teaching us the reality we all experience: weeds or tares, both literally and spiritually, are a post-Eden fact of life in the world, the church, and in our lives. Weeds or tares happen, so we have to learn to deal with them.

The kingdom of God on earth is a messy, mixed field where good and bad stuff and people are so intermingled that it's not safe or good for us to try to separate them with our own limited wisdom and vision; a vision that only sees through a mirror dimly in this life. We don't like the messy ambiguity of who's in or out, so we want to draw a line in the sand. The problem with drawing lines in the sand, or in immediately trying to tear out the tares, is that by drawing that line we may be actually drawing ourselves outside of God's gracious heart, or in trying to tear out the tares - we may actually be uprooting ourselves!

As someone once humorously said, "I am certain there will be three surprises in heaven: I will see some people there I never expected to see; there will be a number of people missing whom I expected to see there; and there will be others who will be surprised to see me there!" In other words, the bad news/good news of the reign of God is that God started down the road of freedom and love a long time ago, and he will not turn back from that path.

Freedom, as we learn every day is a messy business. It takes patience and trust. We see the same in God's running of the world. God takes the risk of not being too hasty with the weeding process. God's justice seems to take a long time because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, as Psalm 86:15 reminds us. The truth of the matter, though, is that God's patient mercy drives us crazy at times - except that is, when we need and want him to be patient with us and our sins! The truth Jesus reveals in this parable is hard for us to accept because he's telling us something we really don't want to hear. When we encounter what we see as evil our immediate reaction is to want to go on a hunt-and-destroy mission. Our battle cry becomes, "Don't just stand there — do something!"

But that's not what Jesus says to us in this parable. In fact, the parable turns our conventional wisdom on its head when Jesus has the landowner say in effect, "Don't just do something, stand there!" Jesus is teaching

us the important lesson that we are called as his disciples not just to be against things, but instead to be for the good that God will cause to prosper and grow as we wait with the trusting patience of mercy.

It is all about patience: not roll over and play dead patience, not head in the sand patience, but active patience that concentrates on the good, not on the bad. This active patience trusts that the ultimate victory is God's, and that the power of God's antidote of the good news in Christ Jesus is far stronger than the poison of the tares, the bad seed. In short, how we live among the weeds, among the tares, is vital. It is vital that we live as patient, forgiving disciples because, while weeds always remain weeds, and wheat always remains wheat in the natural world, in God's spiritual agriculture God never writes anyone off before death. People can change under the power of God's mercy, as the example of the repentant thief on the cross shows and as we know from personal experience.

To not practice forgiveness is to run the risk of becoming just like the evil we are trying to uproot and remove. A proverb says, "Choose your enemies carefully, because you become like them."¹ How true! It is very easy to become intolerant with intolerant people, or angry at people who are angry at us, or bigoted toward bigoted people. By seeking to destroy our enemies, we usually condemn ourselves because we have become just like them, as another proverb says, "Be careful, lest in fighting the dragon, you become the dragon."

The fact is, we often can't tell the wheat from the weeds, because they are so often intertwined. We even know that to be true at the personal level because in this life all of us who are followers of Jesus Christ are still saints and sinners at the same time. The struggle with the presence of sin in our lives continues even as we pray to be fruitful for God and the kingdom.

Jesus makes clear in the parable that we simply cannot be certain who is "in" or who is "out," and thank God it is not up to us to decide! We can leave the weeding to the angels on the last day, and get on with the mission Jesus has given us - proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.

The landowner in the parable did not panic at the actions of his enemy because he knew he would make it all right in the harvest, reaping the good and destroying the bad. In the meantime, the landowner was more interested in seeing things grow than he was in having a pure and tidy field. Jesus is saying to us here that we can relax. We don't have to be in the judging business or in the business of destroying that which works against God. The owner of the "farm," God himself, will make it all come out right in the end, as the apostle Paul reminds us in Romans, chapter 8, "we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

We can trust in that promise because in the cross and the resurrection Jesus Christ died and lived out the meaning of this parable. Hanging on the cross, he did not seek to destroy his enemies who sowed the lethal seeds of death that choked out his life. Instead, he forgave them, trusted in his Father's will to sort it out in the end, and while he was hanging there he focused on the good wheat around him and drew the thief on the cross into the harvest of paradise.

The power of the resurrection proves the truth of the parable of the wheat and weeds. Therefore we can recommit ourselves to leaving the weeds to God while, with all our hearts and souls, we patiently work at nurturing the growth of the wheat God has sown in us, around us, and among us, while we wait for the harvest with joy! Amen.

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