

The Harvest at the End of the Age

In the name of him who set us free from the bondage of decay that we may become the sons of God, dear friends in Christ: One of the questions that has perplexed Christians and baffled theologians from time immemorial is the problem of evil. Where did it come from? How did it originate? If, as God clearly states in the Old Testament reading for this morning, “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god”; and if he is indeed good and gracious and loving, as he in other places describes himself; then how do we explain all the evil in the world? How do explain hate, and crime, and human suffering in all its forms? If the Lord God has been in charge the whole time, and he’s all powerful and knows everything and all that, how did things get so messed up? And perhaps more relevant to our immediate situation (since we find ourselves already in this awful mess), why does he let it go on? Why not stop it now? Right now, today, this moment: eliminate sin and all its consequences so that we can all live happily ever after. If he loves us as much as he says he does, why doesn’t he just do *that*?

Surprisingly enough, it’s precisely because he does love us that he permitted us to get ourselves into this terrible mess, and for the very same reason he lets it go on. Jesus answers the second half of the question (why does God allow evil to continue?) in the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds, which is the Gospel we heard this morning. “Do you want us to pull up the weeds?” the servants ask. “No”, says the Master, “because you may root up the wheat with them.” So, we see that it’s for the sake of the wheat, that is, the children of the kingdom, that the weeds are not destroyed immediately. We’ll come back to that in a bit because that’s what this morning’s message is about. But I don’t want to leave the first part of the question hanging, so we’ll spend just few moments on it, and briefly attempt to answer: “From where and how did evil come?”

We can take from the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds the truth that God himself is not the cause of evil. “An enemy did this”, says the Master when the servants find the weeds in the wheat. We know all that God created was good. It might be argued, “Yes, but didn’t God also make the enemy?” And the answer is no, not really: Satan wasn’t created as an enemy. He defied God and chose that path for himself. And he enticed the first people to follow him on that path. They could have chosen not to. But too often, this whole problem is explained merely in terms of free will or free agency. It’s explained as a failure to pass God’s test of obedience. Now, it’s true that the human will *is* a factor; but it’s not the main point. The main point is love.

You see, God loves people. That’s why he made them. That’s why he created everything in the whole universe: for no other reason than to give to the people he made because he loves them. He loved them so much that he gave them a gift that exceeds all others, and that is the capacity to love as he loves. And God’s love is different than anything you or I have ever experienced coming from within our own sinful hearts. God’s love is totally directed outward. It focuses completely on the object of its devotion. It never thinks of self. It is totally serving, self giving, and self sacrificing. It asks only, “What can I do that is good for you?” and then does it, without thinking about the cost or inconvenience to the self. And an important feature of love is that it must be voluntary.

It has to come willingly from the heart of the one who loves. If it were coerced or forced in any way, it wouldn't be love; it would be a form of slavery.

Therefore, because God gave humankind the ability to love as he does, he had to also give them a means by which they could express their love for God. That's what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was all about. The Lord put it in the center of the garden so that man, by leaving it alone, could say, "As good as that fruit looks, as tempting as it is, I will leave it alone and deprive myself of it – I'll make this sacrifice – to show my love for God." So, you see, it wasn't so much a test of man's obedience as it was an opportunity for man to worship the Lord. This tree that so many have misunderstood as a sort of a spiritual booby trap was actually our first parents' church – their place of worship. That's where they told God who loved them so much that they loved him too. But by choosing to eat of it, as they did in the end, our first parents decided to not to love like God does. They chose instead Satan's kind of love: which is love of the self. It's choosing to love me above everyone else – especially God. That's what Satan did when he used his freedom try to put himself above God. He said, "I want to be first." So, Satan's love is self love. It's the absolute opposite of godly love – and another name for it is "evil". Really, that's all evil is: not loving like God does. And once humans started doing it, there was no going back: after the seeds of the weeds had been sown into the field, there was no way to go back and pick them all up again. So, the wheat and the weeds have been growing together ever since.

All right, that briefly explains the origin of evil. If you want a more complete answer, you'll have to come to one of my Bible studies. But that brings us back to this morning's parable and to the question, "Why doesn't God send his servants to go out and pull up all the weeds right now?" That would seem to make sense. Jesus explains in the parable that there are two kinds of plants growing in the Owner's field. There are the wheat plants that God planted. Those are the children of God's kingdom – the faithful in Christ who have received his Word and believe it. And there are also the weeds that were planted by Satan. Those are the unfaithful whose works are wicked and harmful. And it's interesting that in the parable, Jesus actually names the kind of weed: it's a kind of darnel. It turns out that in the seed head of the darnel grows a certain kind of fungus which produces a deadly toxin. If you failed to separate out the weed heads before going to the grist mill to make your flour, you be in for a deadly surprise when supper time came. It seems that the enemy who sowed the weeds was not just trying to hurt the Owner in the pocketbook by causing him to have a diminished crop and lots of extra work – no, the enemy was hoping to kill somebody.

So now we're inclined to imagine, "Wouldn't it be better for the faithful if we could do away with all those other guys who are so harmful?" Think about it: how violent crime rates would drop and how much safer our communities would be. We wouldn't have to worry about people getting sucked into pagan religions and strange cults because all the false teachers would be gone. Christians would not be persecuted. There wouldn't be so many temptations for us around. Television would have on it nothing but good, wholesome entertainment (that's awfully hard to imagine, isn't it?). Don't misunderstand me, the faithful aren't perfect in this life; but wouldn't things be so much better if just we could do away with all the toxic weeds of Satan? Or at least, the very worst of them?

Jesus answers with an emphatic "No". And to understand his answer, it will help you to know that this darnel weed Jesus mentions is related to wheat and looks just like

it when it sprouts and as it grows. It's not until the heads of both form that anyone able to distinguish a difference. So, initially at least, you can't tell by looking who is a weed and who is wheat. You don't know who among the unbelievers may come to faith tomorrow – or which of their as yet unborn descendants might come into the family of God. Nor do you know who counted among the faithful is really a hypocrite and has no faith at all. So, where – or rather *with whom* would you begin to get rid of the weeds?

It's a sad part of the history of our faith that from time to time well meaning but misguided people have set out to do the weeding. Crusades and wars have been fought against infidels, accused heretics have been tortured and burned, and people have been shunned, robbed, and ridiculed, all (amazingly) in the name of Christ. And how it must grieve our Lord who commanded us to pray for our enemies and do good to them. The Lord doesn't capture hearts and souls with violence and force; he does it with his Word and with his love expressed through his faithful people. That's our job. And in his own good time he will execute judgment on his enemies. That's his job.

Well, okay then, if that's true, why doesn't God himself root up the weeds right now? Sure, we can't do it: we can't tell the difference – but surely, he knows who is, and who is not, and who will become his children. Why doesn't he just get rid of the rest of them? That would still be better for the rest of us, wouldn't it?

Surprisingly the answer is still no. Note that in the parable, it's after the heads of the plants form that the servants ask the master if he wants them to pull up the weeds. It's after the difference appears. But something else you should know about darnel is that its root system is deeper and wider than the roots of wheat. In the soil, the roots of both would be all mixed up and grown together. If you tried to pull the weeds, most of the wheat would come up with it – and then you'd be stuck with a lot of wheat that you couldn't use because it hadn't yet ripened. For the wheat to mature properly you have to wait, and to do that you have to let the weeds grow too.

And that's the key to understanding the parable. For God's people to mature properly in their faith, and for them to produce their full potential of the fruits of faith, the weeds have to grow too right along side them. In a sense, we need them. You see, God loves people that hate him. That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. It's about God loving us so much that he gave his Son to die for us, even though we hated him and loved only ourselves. It's about Christ rising to give us a new life free from the evil of self love. So, for us to learn to love like God does, we need people who hate us. Part of our growing in the faith is our interaction with them: how we show love and kindness to them despite their hatred of us; how we continue to witness to the truth of the Gospel even in the face of persecution, insult, and ridicule. And as we do, who knows which of them will hear the message and see God's love through us and in the end, turn out to be one of us? Our living in a sin-filled world full of suffering and sadness provides the resistance we need to struggle against in order to mature properly, so that when the end of the age comes, God will find us ready for harvest.

The reason that we who are faithful must struggle to grow is that we are sinners ourselves. Beneath the surface, our roots are completely tangled up in sin. Our thoughts are wicked, our motives are selfish ... we don't love like God does. But we are growing and maturing. Every time we come into God's presence, as we are doing now through his Word and Sacraments, there is a kind of miniature harvest that takes place. It's the end of an age, as it were: maybe of a day, a week, a season, or whatever.

Whenever and as often as God comes to us and we stand before him, it's judgment day; not for everyone, but for us as individuals.

In each of us there is both the good seed planted by God and also the weeds of Satan. And when God comes to us and shines the light of his truth on our hearts, we are able to see the weeds clearly. We are very much aware of our sin. And he tells us to bind them up and throw them into the fire – that's exactly what we do when we confess them. Because of Christ's suffering for us, he can take those weeds away leaving nothing but the good that the Spirit worked through us by the Word. And then, planted again with the good seed we've just heard, we go back into the world to keep growing; to keep showing God's love in a hostile world.

And so it goes: seasons of planting, harvest, and separating out the weeds as we continue to grow and bear the fruit of love in which God delights. It is through this process that God is transforming us to the image of his Son, so that when the end of the final age comes, we will be counted among the righteous who will shine like the sun – or rather like the Son of God – in the kingdom of our Father. Then we will see that the sadness and suffering we experienced here on account of all the evil in the world will be not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

May our gracious Father then give us the grace to concentrate on this work of planting, harvesting, and separating out the weeds that are within so that we may become increasingly productive fields for him. And may he give us also the grace to see the weeds that are growing around us as opportunities to show the love that God through his Son, Jesus, never fails to show for us. May this be our sacred calling and joyful task from now until our Savior comes to bring his harvest home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!