

SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2020

PENTECOST 7

MATTHEW 13:24-30. 36-43

LET THE WEEDS ALONE - TRADITIONAL

MANY OF YOU KNOW THAT BEFORE I CAME HERE, I SPENT SEVERAL YEARS WORKING IN CONGREGATIONS MIRED IN SEVERE CONFLICT. WITHOUT FAIL, I WOULD ARRIVE, AND WITHIN DAYS FOLKS WOULD BE LINED UP JUST EAGER TO POINT OUT WHO THE TROUBLE-MAKERS WERE, AND WHERE THE CAUSE OF CHAOS WAS, AND EVEN HAD CHOICE SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW I NEEDED TO CORRECT THINGS SO THEY COULD MOVE ON WITH THEIR LIVES.

THEY THOUGHT I SHOULD UPROOT THE PERCEIVED EVIL IN THEIR MIDST AND ALL WOULD BE WELL AGAIN.

OUR GOSPEL TEXT FOR TODAY ADDRESSES THE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO EVIL, TO WHAT WE AS GOOD PEOPLE SHOULD DO ABOUT THE BAD THINGS IN OUR MIDST.

"A FARMER HAD A FIELD," JESUS SAYS, PERFECT AND PURE, READY TO PRODUCE NOTHING BUT GOOD GRAIN, BUT IN THE NIGHT AN ENEMY CAME AND SOWED WEEDS AMONG THE WHEAT THAT HAD BEEN SOWN. WHEN THE WHEAT CAME UP, SO DID THE WEEDS, AND THE SERVANTS WHO WORKED IN THE FIELD CAME TO THE MASTER. "DIDN'T YOU SOW GOOD SEED?" THEY ASKED. "LOOK AT THIS. YOUR FIELD HAS WEEDS GROWING IN IT!" LATER JESUS WOULD SAY THAT THAT FIELD IS LIKE THE WORLD: WEEDY. CORRUPT. NOT THE WAY IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE.

I DON'T NEED TO TELL YOU THAT WE LIVE IN A WORLD LIKE THIS – JUST LOOK AT THE NEWS, OR READ THE PAPER, OR EXAMINE YOUR OWN LIVES, AND YOU WILL SEE WHAT I MEAN. AND THERE WILL BE DAYS WHEN YOU THINK MAYBE YOU COULD OR SHOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT, AND LIKE THE FARM HANDS IN THE STORY YOU VOLUNTEER TO GO OUT INTO THE WORLD AND RIP UP EVIL BY ITS VERY ROOTS. AND THAT'S WHEN THE MASTER SAYS – WAIT.

AND THIS IS THE SURPRISE OF THE STORY – THAT PLACE OF UNEXPECTEDNESS THAT COMES ALONG WHERE WE NEED TO

PAY ATTENTION, BECAUSE OUR EXPECTATION IS ONE THING, AND WHAT WE GET FROM JESUS IS ANOTHER THING ENTIRELY. WE WOULD EXPECT HIM TO SAY – “YES, PULL THOSE WEEDS AS QUICKLY AS YOU CAN, GET THAT STUFF OUT OF MY FIELD.” BUT INSTEAD, HE SAYS, “NO, LET THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS GROW TOGETHER UNTIL THE HARVEST.”

SEE, IF THE STORY IS, AS JESUS SAYS, A STORY ABOUT EVIL IN THE WORLD AND GOD’S RESPONSE TO IT, THEN WHAT JESUS IS SAYING IS THAT GOD’S PLAN TO DEAL WITH IT ISN’T IMMEDIATE, BUT IT WILL BE PERMANENT.

AND HERE’S WHY...WHEN THE SERVANT’S VOLUNTEERED TO GO OUT AND YANK UP THE WEEDS, THE MASTER SAID YOU WOULD DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD – YOU’D HURT THE WHEAT IN THE PROCESS. SEE, THE TYPE OF WEED THAT WAS SOWN WAS A VERY SPECIFIC WEED – ONE THAT WAS EASY TO MISTAKE FOR THE REAL THING – ONE THAT ACTUALLY LOOKED LIKE WHEAT – AND A FRENZY OF WEED PULLING WOULD YANK THE GOOD ALONG WITH THE BAD.

SOMETIMES, IT'S DIFFICULT TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GOOD AND THE BAD, AND MORE HARM THAN GOOD WILL BE DONE IN THE PROCESS.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT AFTER THE ENEMY SOWS HIS SEED, HE GOES AWAY. HE IS CONFIDENT THAT THE DAMAGE HE INTENDS WILL BE DONE. HE THINKS HE CAN SUCKER THE FORCES OF GOODNESS INTO TAKING UP ARMS AGAINST THE CONFUSION HE HAS INTRODUCED, TO DO HIS WORK FOR HIM. AND SO, HE HAS NO NEED TO HANG AROUND. UNABLE TO TAKE POSITIVE ACTION ANYWAY-HAVING NO REAL POWER TO MUCK UP THE OPERATION-HE SIMPLY SPRINKLES AROUND A GENEROUS HELPING OF DARKNESS AND WAITS FOR THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT TO GET FLUSTERED ENOUGH TO DO THE JOB FOR HIM"

BUT IN THIS STORY, AT LEAST, THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENS. THE MASTER SAYS, "WAIT. LET THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS GROW UP TOGETHER UNTIL THE HARVEST, AND WHEN THE HARVEST COMES I WILL TELL THE FARM HANDS TO COLLECT THE WEEDS AND BIND THEM IN BUNDLES TO BE BURNED, BUT GATHER THE WHEAT INTO MY BARN." CAN YOU SEE THAT IT'S NOT AS IF THE MASTER LIKES HAVING WEEDS IN HIS FIELD; IT'S JUST THAT HE HAS A DIFFERENT PLAN FOR DEALING WITH

THEM. HIS SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM IS ULTIMATE, FINAL, COMPLETE.

AND JESUS WANTS US TO HEAR THAT THIS IS GOD'S WAY OF DEALING WITH THE EVIL IN THE WORLD AND IN OUR CITIES, OUR FAMILIES, OUR CHURCHES, OURSELVES-NOT IMMEDIATELY BUT FINALLY, ONCE AND FOR ALL.

HE SEEMS TO BE MUCH MORE CONCERNED ABOUT RESCUING PEOPLE THAN PROGRAMS AND HE DOES IT GOD'S WAY, BY GOING TO JERUSALEM WHERE HE IS ARRESTED AND TRIED AND CRUCIFIED. AS HE HANGS THERE ON THE CROSS, IT WOULD BE EASY TO BELIEVE THAT GOD'S WAY HAS FAILED, THAT EVIL HAS TRIUMPHED, THAT THE FIELD OF THE WORLD HAS BEEN COMPLETELY OVERCOME BY WEEDS. BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT HAPPENED. IN THE DEATH OF JESUS, WE WHO BELIEVE THAT EVIL WAS SOMEHOW, ULTIMATELY, CONQUERED, SO THAT WHILE IT MIGHT EXERCISE DOMINION FOR A WHILE, IT WILL NOT EXERCISE DOMINION FOREVER.

ONE OF THESE DAYS, WE PRAY THAT ALL THE EVIL IN THE WORLD IS GOING TO BE GATHERED UP INTO BUNDLES AND

BURNED IN THE FURNACE OF HELL. IN THE MEANTIME, WE ACCEPT THE FACT THAT WE LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE THERE ARE WEEDS. AND RATHER THAN TRYING TO PULL UP EVERYTHING THAT LOOKS EVEN VAGUELY SUSPICIOUS, WE RECOGNIZE THAT NONE OF US – NOT ONE OF US - IS COMPLETELY FREE OF EVIL. BECAUSE THE TRUTH IS, THAT EVEN ON MY BEST DAYS, I HAVE SOME SERIOUS BAD IN ME, AND EVEN ON MY WORST DAYS, THERE IS ALWAYS GOOD WORTH REDEMPTION.

ALL THE MORE REASON TO LEAVE THE SORTING OF GOOD AND EVIL TO GOD AND HIS ANGELS, AND FOR OUR PART TO SPEND OUR TIME TRYING TO BE WHEAT WHEREVER WE ARE PLANTED.

ONE FINAL THOUGHT – BACK TO THOSE CONGREGATIONS I HAVE WORKED WITH – ONE OF THE EXERCISES I DO WITH THEM IS USING THIS VERY TEXT AND ASKING THEM TO IMAGINE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE ADOPTED A POLICY OF WEED PULLING. IF WE DREW A CIRCLE AROUND SAINT HOLINESS CHURCH AND MADE A VOW THAT NO EVIL WOULD CROSS THAT LINE – THAT NO WEEDS WOULD GROW WITHIN THAT BORDER.

I TELL THEM WE COULD SPEND THE REST OF OUR DAYS PROTECTING THAT BOUNDARY, STANDING SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH OUR WEED KILLER AND OUR PITCHFORKS, MAKING SURE THAT WE KEEP OUT ALL THE EVIL THAT LURKS "OUT THERE". I TELL THEM IT WOULD PROBABLY TAKE ALL OUR ENERGY AND MOST OF OUR TIME. AND THEN I HAVE THEM IMAGINE WHAT IF WE ACTUALLY DID IT? WHAT IF WE ACTUALLY SUCCEEDED? WHAT WOULD WE HAVE?

WE WOULD HAVE A CHURCH CHARACTERIZED BY THE ABSENCE OF EVIL – WHICH IS NOT THE SAME AS A CHURCH CHARACTERIZED BY THE PRESENCE OF GOOD. BECAUSE THERE IS A BIT OF BOTH IN ALL OF US.

AND MAYBE THIS IS WHAT JESUS WAS TALKING ABOUT ALL ALONG, THAT IT'S BETTER TO HAVE A WHEAT FIELD WITH WEEDS IN IT TO SORT OUT AT THE END, THAN A FIELD WITH NOTHING AT ALL.

IN A WORLD FULL OF WEEDS PERHAPS THE BEST STRATEGY WE CAN ADOPT AS CHRISTIAN PEOPLE IS THE STRATEGY OF THE

APOSTLE PAUL WHO SAID IN ROMANS 12:21: "DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL, BUT OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD."