

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

TEXT: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

We have just heard one of Jesus' more interesting parables. It may seem a little foreign to us, but the picture in this parable would be clear and familiar to a Palestinian audience. Tares were one of the curses against which a farmer had to labor. They were a weed called bearded darnel. In their early stages the tares so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to distinguish the one from the other. When both had headed out it was easy to tell them apart, but by that time their roots were so intertwined that the tares could not be weeded out without tearing the wheat out with them.

The tares and the wheat are so like each other that the Jews called the tare *bastard wheat*. The tares and wheat could not be safely separated when both were growing, but in the end they had to be separated, because the grain of the bearded darnel is slightly poisonous. It causes dizziness and sickness and is narcotic in its effects, and even a small amount has a bitter and unpleasant taste.

The parable starts out by telling us something about what God has in store for the Good Guys. Matthew begins his Gospel by giving us one of several analogies about what heaven is like. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field. The number one job in Palestine was being a farmer. Everyone knew about the importance of good seeds.

Now the servants who planted the field expected that there might be some bad seed mixed in with the good stuff. That does happen. No matter how well you have tilled the field, no matter how well you have purified and purged the field before you have planted, every farmer expects to see a few weeds in the garden. It is not the appearance of a few weeds, it is the massive ratio of these weeds which clearly terrified these servants. They went back to the farmer and said: 'you did give us good seed, didn't you?' I mean, where in the world did all this stuff come from? You can see the processes of their minds. They are thinking: maybe some of this stuff was actually mixed

in with the wheat when we planted it. Maybe that is why there is so much of it. When they question the farmer, he assures them that the seed he gave them was good. Someone, the farmer said, had deliberately planted these weeds in their field.

Now, Jesus is not telling his listeners that this sort of thing happens every day, but he knows that from time to time tares will grow up in good gardens and fields. But in this circumstance it doesn't cross the minds of the servants that someone would actually come into their field and plant weeds. But that's exactly what the landowner told them.

So that brings us to the "Bad Guys". The picture of a man deliberately sowing darnel in someone else's field is by no means only imagination. That was actually sometimes done. To this day in India one of the direct threats which a man can make to his enemy is "I will sow bad seed in your field". And in codified Roman law this crime is forbidden and its punishment is laid down.

There is a more modern story – well, it happened back in the 1850s. Dean Henry Alford, who wrote a four-volume commentary on the New Testament, was a farmer himself, and someone did this to him. They didn't sow poisonous weeds, but they did sow some kind of weed in his field. Apparently they wanted him to have a bad crop so that their crop prices would go up and they would have better prices at the local market when harvest time came.

Jesus is telling his listeners that there is always a hostile power in the world, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Our experience is that both kinds of influence act upon our lives, the influence which helps the seed of the word to flourish and to grow, and the influence which seeks to destroy the good weed before it can produce fruit at all.

So, in today's parable, while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. Who would come at night and sow weeds

into a field of wheat? That person must have been downright dirty and full of evil in his heart. That person must have been an enemy of the farmer to do such a dirty deed.

The first reaction of the servants is to root out the bad guys who are causing trouble. This has not been a unique response from Christians through the centuries. Seven hundred years ago church leaders asked for permission to begin the Inquisition. The Pope should have read this parable and let things be, but a few weeds and a huge amount of good plants were purged from our churches. Three centuries ago Protestants were obsessed with witches, and hundreds of innocent women were terrorized and killed. These days we don't kill those who bother us, but there are other ways to keep those we consider "weeds" from our churches. In Ireland the Protestants and Roman Catholics are still excluded from each others' community. Even in our United Methodist churches we see members rejecting those they consider "less desirable".

This particular story is as much an allegory as a parable so we have to ask the question: Who is the enemy anyway? The weeds, of course, are the children of the "evil one", and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. We don't like to talk about Satan – or the devil – in our society today.

So we now need to face the Ugly – the Ugly Truth. The parable of the weeds and the wheat is one of several judgment parables from Matthew. These stories have to do with the final judgment. And at that moment of judgment, God will separate the good from the bad. This is the Ugly part of the story – but, yes, the Ugly Truth.

We realize that Jesus, as always, was talking about us. Yes, he was talking to and about his listeners that day. But he is talking to us today, here in the State of Washington; here in our community of faith. The Ugly Truth is that the harvest is the end of the age. The end of the age –the last and final judgment. We recall other parables about the last judgment such as the separation of the sheep and the goats, the talents, the wise and foolish virgins.

At harvest time, the weeds are collected, along with the chaff, and burned up. So will it be, says Matthew, at the End of Time. Once again, Jesus was using a familiar common and everyday image for his teaching. Being a rural, agrarian society, farmers would know what this is all about. After the harvest, farmers would burn the weeds and chaff. If you have traveled through the Willamette Valley in Oregon after the grass harvests there, you could see – and perhaps even be blinded by – the smoke from the burning stubble of the fields as the farmers get them ready for the next planting. Similar images of burning fields would have been common in Jesus' day.

Ok, so what's this all about? That's what the disciples wanted to know. That's covered in the second part of today's reading.

Jesus explains that this is all referring to the Kingdom of Heaven. He says his kingdom of heaven, the kingdom he is establishing is like this. God sows good seed. Many respond to it and grow in faith. But at the same time, the enemy (the evil one, Satan, whatever term you would choose) is working against his kingdom. He sows tares, so that the sons of light and sons of darkness coexist in the kingdom. The disciples ask, "Should we not then root out the sons of darkness?" Jesus says, "No, I have specialists for that. I will send my angels to make that final division at the end of time, at the judgment". This is a revelation! The disciples learn that the kingdom itself will be mixed in character, thus correcting their expectation that the kingdom would be perfectly pure. As the servants in the parable wanted to weed out the tares at the start, the farmer had them wait, let the seeds and the weeds – the Good and the Bad – grow together until the Ugly Truth of the final judgment came around.

Today's scripture teaches us five lessons:

1. It teaches us that there is always a hostile power in the world, seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Our experience is that both kinds of influence act upon our lives, the influence which helps the seed of the word to flourish and to grow, and the influence

which seeks to destroy the good seed before it can produce fruit at all. The lesson is that we must forever on our guard.

2. It teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are the Good Guys and those who are not. A man may appear to be good and may in fact be bad; and a man may appear to be bad and may yet be good. We are much too quick to classify people and label them good or bad without knowing all the facts.

3. It teaches us not to be so quick with our judgments. If the reapers had had their way, they would have tried to tear out the darnel and they would have torn out the wheat as well. Judgment had to wait until the harvest came. A man in the end will be judged, not by any single act or stage in his life, but by his whole life. Judgment cannot come until the end. A man may make a great mistake, and then redeem himself and, by the grace of God, atone for it by making the rest of life a lovely thing. A man may live an honorable life and then in the end wreck it all by a sudden collapse into sin. No one who sees only part of a thing can judge the whole; and no one who knows only part of a man's life can judge the whole man.

4. It teaches us that judgment does come in the end. Judgment is not hasty, but judgment comes. It may be that, humanly speaking, in this life the sinner seems to escape the consequences, but there is a life to come. It may be that, humanly speaking, goodness never seems to enter into its reward, but there is a new world to redress the balance of the old.

5. And, finally, it teaches us that the only person with the right to judge is God. It is God alone who can discern the good and the bad; it is God alone who sees all of a man and all of his life. It is God alone who can judge.

So this parable is a warning not to judge people at all, and a warning that in the end there comes the judgment of God. God gives us a choice. Are we the wheat or the weed? What sort of fruit do we produce? If the answers to these questions are less than

clear, never fear. God gives us the chance and the means to change and walk closer to God. But the chance requires action. Inaction is not an option.

Both the Good and the Bad will eventually face the Ugly Truth of a final judgment. The choice is ours. Amen.