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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, July 19, 2020
7th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 16/Proper 11/Year A
First Reading: Isaiah 44:6-8
Second Reading: Romans 8:12-25
Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Sermon Title: “Why Is There Evil In The World?”

Theme

It is an age-old question: why is there evil in the world? In the parable of the wheat and the weeds Jesus suggests that both grow together until the harvest. With Paul, we long for the day that all creation will be set free from bondage and suffering. Having both weeds and wheat within us, we humbly place our hope in the promises of God, and from the Lord’s table we go forth to bear the fruit of justice and mercy.

Text

²⁴[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Sermon

Way back in the spring of 1983 or 84, Carol and I contracted to have our second home, custom-built in St. Mary's, Ohio. It was a modest home in a development that was previously a field. We had fun being able to participate in the design and layout and details of the house. We put a lot of sweat equity into that home too. We painted the entire interior and did the landscaping including the yard – and that is the part, the sowing of a new yard, that pertains to this particular Gospel Reading.

The house was finished and fall was coming. I studied up on how to prepare and sow a new lawn. I had the soil checked out at the county agriculture office. I knew that our soil had a lot of clay in it, so I hauled tons of sand to the lot and distributed it one shovel full at a time all over the lot so that Carol's father, who had a garden tractor that had a tiller attachment, could till it in. The soil was ready and the grade was perfectly flat.

I bought twice as much of the best bluegrass seed as was recommended for my square footage but I didn't care. I bought one of those seed spreader deals that I wore around my shoulder and spread the seed evenly, and then bought several bales of straw from a local farmer and bedded it down and started the sprinklers. Carol and I were vigilant in moving them around to make sure the whole yard got soaked at least once a day.

As I said, it was fall, and fall soon gave way to winter, and winter that year presented itself with howling winds and blowing snow across that former field. But when spring finally came, we had ...the ugliest, most hideous, patchwork of bare ground and farm field weeds interspersed with little patches of bluegrass that survived.

Turns out that those bales of straw also contained a lot of field weeds and they thrived in my freshly tilled and prepared soil. I knew that I could not treat the lawn with weedkiller because the baby bluegrass wouldn't tolerate it. And, as Jesus' parable indicated, I could not pull up the hideous cursed weeds even though they grew twice as fast and ten times as high as the grass did, or I would have pulled out the grass too. So for that spring and half the summer, we just had to mow it. But, I must say that by the end of the summer, it was looking pretty good. And the next

spring and summer it looked great – just in time for Parker Hannifin to transfer me back to Chicago in the fall.

Jesus told a parable about what the kingdom of heaven is like - not will be like, but *is* like. He said the kingdom of heaven is compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field and went home at night and while he was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among his wheat seed.

The wheat seed came up, but so did weeds – throughout his field. When his laborers brought it to his attention, the owner of the field said that an enemy had sowed those weeds. That never occurred to me. Hey, maybe that is what happened to me, someone sowed those weeds in my yard while I was sleeping!

Anyway, the laborers asked if the owner wanted them to pull the weeds, but as you know, new wheat looks a lot like grass and as with my situation, the field owner pointed out that if they attempted to pull the weeds, they would just end up pulling up the wheat too. The solution was that when it was harvested, by hand in those days, the laborers would separate the weeds and burn them then. For those of you inexperienced with farm equipment, when wheat is harvested today, it harvests whatever is in its path, weeds and all, and that is why there are weed seeds in a bale of straw.

Well, as in the case of last week's Gospel Reading, Jesus explained the parable so I don't need to. I would rather fuss with the question that is the sermon title, "*Why Is There Evil In The World?*"

Seriously, for all the time, and effort and money I spent on that yard, why did those cursed field weeds sprout up? Now, I know I am going to have to get over that yard, it was nearly 40 years ago. But the question, just like Jesus' parable, really has nothing to do with agriculture specifically.

Have you ever noticed, in your classroom if you are a teacher or a student, in your office complex if you are a business person, on your assembly line if you are a laborer, or on your hospital floor if you are a nurse or therapist - it seems like there are always one or two people who just don't fit in and make everyone else miserable. And you've always wondered why the boss doesn't see it and pluck them like weeds.

Or maybe it's a group of people, like the opposite political party, or an enemy nation. Or maybe it is not a person or people at all but a condition like poverty or unemployment, or a disease like COVID-19.

Have you ever asked yourself, "*Why is there evil in the world?*" Seriously, if there is a God and North Korea, and Iran, and Iraq constitute an "axis of evil," why doesn't God just wipe them out?

I don't suppose an atheist or an agnostic ponders these questions because, without an example to strive to live up to as Christians have in Jesus, we could become like animals and live as if there is no evil, and therefore no consequences, and no motivation to help anyone but ourselves. So I think religious people and specifically Christians ponder this question, "*Why is there evil in the world?*"

Well, far be it for me to claim to have the answer for one of the biggest questions in human history, but working off of what Jesus said, situations like evil, disease, war, suffering, etc., weeds among the good seed of God's good creation, will exist, and he made no attempt to answer the question even though we probably think he could have.

So since we cannot answer why evil exists, the next most important question becomes, *what do we do about evil* (i.e., hunger, suffering, disease and disability, and social injustice, etc.)? And about that question, I have an answer, not surprisingly, inspired by the example of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus did not sit down and ponder why hunger, and suffering, and disease and disability, and social injustice happens. No, what he did was confront it. When he saw hunger, he fed the people. When he saw suffering he stepped in to alleviate it. When he saw sickness and disease he cured it. And when he saw social injustice he stepped in to rectify it.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

As his followers then, I think we should do the same. And by the way, as a church, we do engage most of those examples to some degree or another. These evil weed conditions do exist and do happen, and as followers of Jesus Christ, we should see them as opportunities to demonstrate our discipleship in him.

I'm not going to say that God looked down and saw that we needed a project and gave us the weeds of hunger, and suffering, and disease and disability, and social injustice, and the like, but I am willing to say that though God could snap his fingers and make it all better, that has not worked in human history. Remember the creation story, remember the flood story, remember Sodom and Gomorrah? Whenever God has stepped in to fix a human problem, we humans refused to learn our lesson and found another way to misbehave.

So yes, I do think that evil exists in the world AND (and not because evil exists in the world) that provides us with the opportunity to confront it and be like Jesus; Christians; little Christs.

In the same way, we pray each week, "lead us not into temptation," has God worked that one out for you? No? Me neither, and yet Jesus taught us to pray that way and we've been vigilant in doing it for two-thousand years. Why doesn't God just not lead us into temptation?

Because temptation provides us with an opportunity to rely on God through the Holy Spirit, and overcome the temptation. And when we overcome temptation we build our character into something that resembles Christ, we become a little more Christ-like.

So why is there evil in the world? Mostly because we sinful people put it there. But given that it exists, we have a great opportunity to be like Jesus; Christians; little Christs. Let's begin there, being like him, and doing what he would do, and let us be a part of the solution to evil in the world, instead of part of the problem. Jesus said that when his followers do that, that is what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Prayer

Lord, forgive us when we sit around wondering why you don't do something for all the world's problems. Inspire us by the example of Jesus to get up and do as he would do to confront the problems we face with your help. Inspire us to be about the kingdom of heaven now, where we are. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen