

Living in The World

In this coming Sunday's Gospel reading (Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43), Jesus tells another parable about the kingdom of heaven. Last week I explained that a parable is a short story using everyday examples to illustrate a deeper spiritual truth. There are between twenty-seven and fifty parables of Jesus recorded in the four Gospels. The wide range in the number of parables occurs because biblical scholars disagree on which stories were actually true parables.

This week we hear the parable of the wheat and the weeds, also known as the parable of the wheat and the tares. Anyone who gardens or who looks after a lawn knows how damaging weeds can be. They use up water and nutrients, they block sunlight, they are unsightly, and they can even be dangerous.

In this parable, the weed that Jesus was speaking of was mostly likely the *bearded darnel*. This plant is very similar to the wheat that grows in the Middle East and it was indistinguishable from wheat in its early stages. By the time the wheat and the bearded darnel matured, their root systems were so intertwined that removing one plant would destroy the other. So farmers had no choice but to let both plants coexist until the harvest. Once they were harvested, women would have to hand pick the grains of wheat, which were a different colour from the grains of the bearded darnel. This was a very time-consuming and labour-intensive process, but it was necessary. The bearded darnel was a poisonous plant. It had a bitter taste and ingesting it could cause narcotic-like effects.

There are several lessons to be learned from this parable. Jesus was warning His audience that not everyone was going to accept Him. This was true in Jesus' time and it is still true today. We live our lives alongside people who reject the Gospel message. Just as the wheat and the bearded darnel had to coexist, we need to learn to live with those who do not accept Jesus. It can be difficult, if not impossible, to separate ourselves out from all non-believers. Just as the root systems of those two plants were intertwined, so too are our relationships with non-believers. We likely encounter them in our community, in our workplaces, and even in our families. This parable seems to suggest that we should not separate ourselves out from non-believers or live with a fortress-like mentality.

We live in a world where people perpetrate evil acts. Sometimes those who are evil are easy to pick out and sometimes they are not. The wheat and the bearded darnel appear very similar on the outside and it is only when they are fully matured and harvested that they can be separated. The same is true of people. Those who are true believers and those who are not can appear to be very similar. It is not our job to judge others based on their outward appearance or even by their actions, because we can never really know a person's true intent. One of the dangers of judging others is that we risk getting it wrong. We can reject a person who we falsely believe to be evil, and we can accept a person who we falsely believe to be good. Judging belongs to God (James 4: 12), and this parable reinforces that message.

Although it may be uncomfortable for us to face it, this parable also reminds us of the reality of God's judgement against sin and the future ultimate destruction of evil. At the time of harvesting, the wheat and the bearded darnel were carefully separated. The wheat was gathered

but the bearded darnel was destroyed by fire.

The fate of the wheat and the bearded darnel was determined before they were even planted, since a seed can only produce one type of plant. The good news for us is that we have a choice as to how our story turns out. Unlike plants, we have the ability to make choices and to change our destiny. By living as followers of Jesus with the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can produce good fruit, which the Bible identifies as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23).

The parable of the wheat and the weeds reminds us of the reality of evil in our world, the need to co-exist with non-believers, the importance of not judging others, and the coming judgement against sin and the destruction of evil. Let us live our lives so that we produce fruit worthy of a good harvest.

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