“Cohabitation”

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Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

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

***24He put before them 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!***

Here we are, in week two of three weeks of Jesus’ parables. Reading over the parable for today, I thought immediately of an event that happened at the church my family attends in San Francisco, last Sunday.

Calvary Presbyterian Church is a proud socially active community around issues of immigration, black lives matter, and are a pro-LGBTQ+ and trans-supporting community. They are not shy about any of their messages. They march in parades and demonstrations, they show up at immigration court hearings for people in need, put up displays outside their building in reaction to children being separated at the border, and they had a Drag Story Hour recently. Last Sunday, they welcomed a visitor to the bible study before worship at Calvary. After a little while the man who looked like a normal visitor began to engage in disturbing behavior, shouting anti-gay hell-fire and brimstone phrases at people, and agitating in general. Becoming belligerent, he was escorted out of the building where several others people from whatever group he was a part of, met him outside on the steps of the church. The group proceeded to shout obscene hurtful statements at anyone coming into Calvary for worship that morning. The police were called and the group was asked to cross the street. The folks at Calvary were worried and upset and quickly mobilized to provide safe access into the building for worshipers. Calvary has three pastors, but on that day my colleague who is one of the pastors there happened to be the only pastor working that day. She alone had to run the bible study, quickly discern the trouble when it began, hold onto her own fear and worry while she returned to finish the bible study – and then, lead worship on her own. Pastorally she needed to tend to the congregation in front of her, while simultaneously having her own feelings.

All of the other leaders at Calvary stepped up and no one was alone. All three of the pastors this week have been on the front lines of social media saying things like, “We must be doing something right if people hate us!” because social justice often brings fury from those who feel threatened. And saying “When hate gets loud, love must get louder.” “We welcome all people, but not all behaviors.” They even offered prayers for that group of people, asking God to help that group to use their energy to feed the hungry and help the suffering.

To understand more about how this event at Calvary is similar to our parable about the farmer that we read a few minutes ago, we need to understand a little something about the weeds.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that a weed was just a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered. The weed in this parable is called darnel. Darnel, evidently does not have any virtues.

You who know about plants way more than I, may already know what darnel is. Darnel is wheat’s evil twin. Eaten in quantity, this poisonous weed can kill. This weed is such an imposter that it can’t even survive unless it is a stowaway: “the plant’s survival strategy requires its seeds to be harvested along with those of domesticated grasses, stored and replanted next season.” In the first century, darnel did have virtues – if you were a witch, or a sorcerer, or wanted to poison someone. Ethnobiologists studying darnel have found that darnel shows up time and again in key literary texts, as a symbol of subversion. “Where there is darnel, there is treachery and toxicity,” they write. Darnel occurs in Shakespeare’s King Lear, and Hamlet; in writings of Ovid, in Medieval beer, and in classical Greek it was even found in the rites of Demeter and Persephone’s followers. I found it difficult to stop going down that hole of learning about this sneaky weed. Knowing more about the weed helps to make sense of the parable. For example, why wouldn’t the farmer want to pull up the weeds right away? Clearly darnel is something you wouldn’t want among you wheat crop.

It turns out that darnel and wheat are difficult to distinguish because they are both grasses. In the seed phase they look alike. As they begin to sprout above ground it’s still not that easy. It isn’t until they are almost ready to go to seed again that the final flower appears different. The roots of the two can get wrapped around each other and tangled together so that by the time you *can* tell them apart, it is impossible to uproot one and not the other. After everything is harvested though, then the two can be distinguished and separated.

Some trouble doesn’t appear to be trouble early on. When the newcomer entered Calvary and joined the bible study, he appeared just like any other newcomer and was welcomed amongst the others in the class. It was hard to tell him apart from any other. Later though, as his true intentions became clear, then action was taken.

The important thing to notice then is that the final demise of those deemed to be weeds is not decided by the farmer. The folks at Calvary don’t get to decide what happens to that group that targeted the church. Yes they escorted him out, and yes they put some distance between the church and the protesters, but what happens specifically to those that caused harm is not ultimately up to the church folks. This parable is *not* telling *us* to throw the weeds into the unquenchable fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth – the violent biblical language we read. This parable is telling us that for a time, the weeds and the wheat exist together. It’s not for us to decide who is in and who is out, how to catch every sin we see, like humanity is supposed to be one giant tattletale. We have to resist the urge to yank out every weed we see. It’s just not our job. That’s for God.

Our job is to follow God’s word and leave the final dispensation to God in God’s time. Following God’s word to us will always lead to building up, loving, serving, and helping to relieve suffering, not to tearing down and causing suffering. Getting all the wrongs righted isn’t the point. But living with and reacting to the weeds around us – whether it’s in our classrooms, our families, our neighborhoods – that’s the point. How do we live with all those weeds? How do we react to the bullies, the fear mongers, the dishonest, those that would cause harm?

One answer can be found in one particular line in today’s parable. In verse 30, the farmer tells the workers to let things be. “Let them grow together until the harvest.” The word used to say “let” in that verse is the same word used in the Lord’s Prayer and elsewhere to mean “forgiveness.” 1

What if, as we’re living with the weeds all around us, we just let them be by using what we know about forgiveness? An entire sermon series, and books have been written about the meaning of forgiveness. Even before Jesus, John the Baptist came proclaiming baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The easiest way to say what forgiveness is, is to start by explaining what forgiveness is *not*. Forgiveness is *not* putting up with wrong doing, is *not* remaining in harms way, is *not* doing nothing in the face of danger. Forgiveness has more to do with finding a way to let go of the hold that the wrong has over us.

Without forgiveness our hurt turns to resentment and revenge. Without forgiveness we are trapped in the mire of unfinished business, trapped in the sludge of waiting for an opportunity to treat them in the same hurtful way they treated us; forgiveness relieves us of the decision making about ultimate fairness, ultimate restoration, ultimate return to wholeness.

This parable barely discusses the evil one – the one who *caused* the weeds to be in that fertile field. In the parable, the field itself never becomes pure. It’s not until the harvest that anything gets cleared up. And it’s also not really about those evil ones finally getting what they deserve and our corresponding glee. It’s not about the past, or the future. The parable is about the present time. The specifics may change, but there is always wheat *and* weeds. The kingdom of heaven is this co-mingling of a whole range of health and dis-ease. The kingdom of heaven is when *God* decides who will be weeping and gnashing their teeth. And for that, we give thanks to God.

Let us pray…

<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-07-17/matthew-1324-30-36-43/>

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<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/wheats-evil-twin-has-been-intoxicating-humans-for-centuries>