Concerning Not Rushing to Judgment  
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-40  
Olivet Presbyterian Church  
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We are drawn to scenarios like this biblical parable that Jesus tells, where the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. It’s very satisfying. I think it’s why we love many of the movies and books that we love. John Wayne and Clint Eastwood will always bring the bad guys to justice; we know that from the outset and we love to watch it happen. Most Disney films involve an epic struggle between good and evil where the good win (think ... Lion King, 101 Dalmatians, Cinderella, Little Mermaid, Frozen, I’m sure we could go on). We read through seven Harry Potter books, some 4000 delightful and nail-biting pages, in order to find out if and how Harry destroys the evil Lord Voldemort. And it take Katniss Everdeen three Hunger Games books to do away with her nemesis President Snow. Every superhero needs a super villain to triumph over.

And it is so very satisfying to us, the viewers and the readers, as the evil get what’s coming to them and the good are richly rewarded.

I think we love seeing this in our fiction because we know that in real life it doesn’t always work out that way. The scriptures reflect the reality we have seen and sometimes live with, namely, that the good are not always rewarded nor the bad always punished. In fact, at times the wicked do just great while the righteous suffer. “Why do the wicked prosper?!” wailed the psalmist, and righteous Job railed against God for his misfortunes.

We have seen situations where true justice was not executed but rather some perverted version of it is meted out. So we love it when the wicked are punished, when the unrighteous are mowed down, when the weeds are uprooted from the garden.

This is the subject of Jesus’ parable that we heard from Matthew’s gospel. Here, Jesus sounds like he could have penned a best-seller. He tells the parable of the weeds and the wheat (a.k.a. the “wheat and the tares,” the tares being a particularly deep-rooted kind of weed that spreads fast) and concludes that at the final judgment day the weeds will be pulled up, bundled up and burned up, and the wheat will be gathered into God’s barn. How satisfying. How satisfying to think that good people like ourselves and our friends in the church will be rewarded and those who
have lived bad lives -- the self-indulgent, the chronic liars, the non-church goers, thieves, murderers and the immoral ones who’ve never had time for anyone but themselves will all get their comeuppance when the final judgment comes.

But there’s more to this parable than its clear, crisp conclusion about judgment day. Before he got to that point, Jesus talked about the dangers of making judgments of our own along the way. It’s as if Jesus said, “Leave the weeding to me. You just focus on growing up as wheat.”

It’s a word of caution in our rush-to-judgment world. Partisanship and name-calling intensify in our country and in our churches. Congress continues to be ideologically grid-locked and congregations split apart from their denominations every day. Sometimes we feel pressured to set up camp in one school of thought or another, and to claim that anyone who disagrees with us is a weed in the garden of life while we are the flower of the garden.

Some are condemned for not caring for the poor, others for caring only for the poor. Some are judged harshly for being too radical and others for not being radical enough. Some are judged for embracing doctrinal errors and others for embracing no doctrine at all.

No wonder Jesus counsels us to hold off on the weed-pulling, for in gathering the weeds we would uproot wheat as also. Apparently, they are intertwined. “Leave the weeding to me,” Jesus says, “Be patient and trust that God knows what’s going on.”

In fact, God knows more than we what’s going on.

A seminar leader showed a class of government workers a series of pictures. The pictures began with a view of a person’s face, and then expanded to show the person’s entire body.

The first picture showed the face of a grizzled man, scowling and straining. He looked very tough, like a member of a motorcycle gang, perhaps gripping the handlebars. But when the entire picture was revealed it was shown to be a man who made wheelchairs for the handicapped, and he was pushing one of his creations.

Another picture showed the face of a lovely woman with a beautiful smile. She might have been a flight attendant or a hostess at an upscale restaurant. But when the view was expanded, the class saw that she was an exotic dancer about to do a pole dance!
It was only when the whole picture was seen that the class could make anything approaching an accurate judgment. Who of us has the whole picture of the moral character of another??

We don’t have the whole picture, Jesus says, and he tells us to put our energies elsewhere. He tells us to put our energies into behaving like wheat rather than rushing to trash the weeds around us. Rather than trying to purify a community, erecting walls and cursing those who disagree with us, our job is to grow up healthy and strong ... and leave the judging to Jesus.

His admonition certainly serves our mental and emotional health. In a wonderful book called Stop Walking on Eggshells, author Randi Kreger writes:

“It can be frustrating and heartbreaking to watch someone you love act in ways that hurt themselves and others. But no matter what you do, you cannot control anyone else's behavior. And moreover, it’s not your job ... Your job is to know who you are, to act according to your own values and beliefs, and to communicate what you need and want to the people in your life ... The only person you can change is you.” (p. 88)

If we find ourselves overly concerned about the weeds around us, we may need to ask ourselves why that is, and re-focus, re-direct our attention away from weeding and onto developing the wheat that God has planted within us, the love and gifts and talents that God has given us.

There is, I believe, still another level of meaning in this parable. Jesus speaks here about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, and he says the kingdom of God is like a situation where wheat and weeds grow together for a time until finally the weeds are cleaned out and burned. Now, it took me aback when a colleague pointed this out -- namely, that this is the kingdom of heaven -- because I have always assumed that the kingdom of heaven is where there are no weeds -- no illness, no hunger, no injustice, no human struggle, no abuse, no neglect, no misunderstandings, no weeds. Everything is harmonious and beautiful; everyone is happy, faithful, loved and loving.

But what if that’s not so? What if the kingdom of heaven comes in the great mix of things, in the ambiguity of life, in the struggle of earning a living, and loving, and playing, and failing, and sometimes being selfish and sometimes messing up and occasionally finding forgiveness in spite of it all? What if the parable suggests that the kingdom of God is born in the midst of the coming and going of life, its ambiguity, its discordance and
disarray where the weeds and the wheat grow together side by side? Wouldn’t that be a surprise?

Yes, and I think that’s where the good news is found, too. Because aren’t all of us some mixture of wheat and weeds, of the good and the bad? I think we are, maybe more than we like to admit.

Now, I must add a disclaimer here, or at least a clarification. The parable does not advocate doing away with all standards of behavior. It is not suggesting that we should create a totally laissez-faire world with no sense of right and wrong, where, for instance, we do away with law enforcement because really God is the only judge, and criminals will someday meet their Maker. Nor does it suggest that the church’s proclamation of grace means we have license to do whatever we want. Within the bounds of God’s grace and freedom there is huge responsibility.

Yet, Jesus himself said it here in this parable. He said, “While we were sleeping, the enemy, the devil, entered the field and scattered bad seed.” He doesn’t chastise us for going out and looking for evil; this is not something we could have prevented. It happened in the middle of the night when we were sleeping like we were supposed to. Rev. Agnes Norfleet writes, “It means that all of us are a mixture of good seed and bad seed, and even the tallest grains of goodness among us, stretching upward toward the sun, are entangled in weeds.”

So if that is the case, and if the point of this parable is that at the harvest, the wheat and weeds are separated and the weeds are burned in an unquenchable fire, then we might not take much comfort here. Because if all of us are a mixture of both then who knows whether the fire might be ours? And the loving God we know in Jesus Christ seems strangely capricious.

Yet, Jesus announced this parable as good news! What can he have meant by that?

I wonder if perhaps the meaning of the fire laid to the weeds is finally something else. That at the end it is the impurity that is burned away from each of us and all of us, we who are a mixture of the wheat and tares growing together. That at last God completes us by taking away all that separates us from God, all that would stand in the way of our health and salvation, all that is impure and keeps us from loving with a love that shines
like the sun, beautiful strands of wheat, men and women fit for the kingdom of God.

There are many in the church who take comfort in the thought that the bad will get theirs in the end and the good will be rewarded. For me, I am content that this side of life I can never finally know if they are right. The God whom I see in Jesus Christ certainly holds us accountable for the evil we do willfully and unwittingly. But those weeds do not blind God to the wheat that is in each of us as well.

Jesus’ parable speaks of God’s patience and of a love that would not lose the good in us for the presence of the bad.

And I believe that the parable also challenges us in the church to have patience with ambiguity. It challenges us to try to look upon other people through his eyes, through the eyes of Jesus Christ rather than through our own limited, human, often judgmental perspective.

Because the truth is -- the good and the bad among us, and the good and the bad within us, are often inseparable. “In God’s garden, good wheat and bad weeds flourish together,” Jesus says. “Leave the final judgment to me.”

Amen.