

The Weed Problem
Isaiah 44:6-8
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Not long after I moved to Prineville, I eagerly bought plants from our annual yard and plant sale. In addition to the iris, hens and chickens, I also bought an unknown succulent I thought would be great for growing in the high desert atmosphere. The succulent like plant not only flourished, but it needed little water to grow, and it eagerly spread itself to the surrounding areas. A few years later, liking the fact that it took little water to survive, I would intentionally take its seeds and throw them over an area of mostly rocks. The plants continued to thrive and spread.

About two years ago, however, I read an article in the Central Oregonian. The picture caught my attention because it had the same cute plant I so happily grew in my front yard. The write up, however, had some less than good news. The plant, not native to our area, was often used as a filler in drier climates, but has since become a noxious weed. And to make matters worse, the milky substance that was inside the plant was highly toxic to humans and animals.

I have to admit, that from experience, I knew better than to handle cutting the plant without gloves because I had received a rash from it before. But I never really thought about it being toxic! Of course, having both children and pets, I knew I had to take a new course of action. These plants I nurtured to grow and multiply had to be removed. So I put on my garden gloves and got to work. I pulled and I cut and I bagged and trashed. Having been relatively successful, I was able to get rid of most of the plants. But I can see now that the end is nowhere in sight. Little plants continue to pop up where some seeds had fallen, and one bigger plant continues to thrive despite my effort to kill it.

When I read through this parable in Matthew, I immediately thought of the cheat grass that plagues my property. But then I remembered this noxious weed which I now know is called myrtle spurge. Fortunately, myrtle spurge is much easier to recognize than some other noxious weeds. In Jesus day, one of the worst noxious weeds was a weed called the bearded darnel. The bearded darnel, which is much like the cheat grass, actually earned the name "cheat wheat" because it looked identical to growing wheat. It was not until harvest time could a person tell the difference between the real wheat and the cheat wheat.

This, however, makes the parable that much more powerful. Evil has many disguises. It can blend and weave into our lives in so many ways that we may not even be able to tell the difference until later in life. Even when we know that evil is at play, we sometimes cannot totally separate the evil from the good without damaging the good.

The master of the wheat field, which in this case represents God, allows the good and the bad to grow together, so that the good will not be uprooted along with the bad. This, for us, is good news! Jesus recognizes the reality of evil. But he also recognizes the need to eradicate evil and the difficulty in doing so.

There are persons we can easily identify as having been overcome by evil such as serial killers, child molesters, abusers, and tyrants. It is easy to see how these persons are intermixed with persons who resist evil such as those whose faith in Jesus is prominent. But there are also forms of evil somewhere in between. Sometimes evil comes in disguise, like the cheat wheat, and it is not as easily recognizable. This is the evil that comes in the form of power imbalance, intimidation, greed, prejudice, hatred, revenge, and gossip. And then there are the little evils that weave themselves into our lives like the countless distractions of email, internet, phone calls, and meetings that deter us from doing God's work. Sometimes facing evil is difficult to avoid, especially when it is in the work place or with our family members. This is like the co-worker you see cheating the company or the family member who makes unethical decisions.

The difficulty of separating the good from the evil is difficult and sometimes even daunting. For those who face addictions, the battle is life long. For those facing temptations and stress, resisting is almost impossible. The weaving of good and evil is difficult to unweave.

The good news for us in this parable is that God knows that evil is weaved in our lives. We are not perfect, nor can we be. Yet God loves us anyway, and when the time comes, God will separate the good from the evil. Whatever evils that are left in our lives will be removed by the angels of God.

This parable is a sign of hope for those who worry that they may never be forgiven. It is a way to help rid our lives of any guilt we may feel. It is also helpful for us to know that evil is difficult to remove, and even though we try and do our best, sometimes we have to wait until God can make the final separation. Consider this example:

The story is told of a farmer in a Midwestern state who had a strong disdain for "religious" things. As he plowed his field on Sunday morning, he would shake his fist at the church people who passed by on their way to worship. October came and the farmer had his finest crop ever--the best in the entire county. When the harvest was complete, he placed an advertisement in the local paper which belittled the Christians for their faith in God. Near the end of his diatribe he wrote, "Faith in God must not mean much if someone like me can prosper." The response from the Christians in the community was quiet and polite. In the next edition of the town paper, a small ad appeared. It read simply, "God doesn't always settle His accounts in October."¹

Evil surrounds us. It is here and there and even pervades a little in each one of us. It is difficult to remove even though we try. But the good news is that God's goodness will prevail. In the end, the good will be separated from evil. Like Jesus says in Matthew 13, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father." Let us give thanks and praise to God who is good and who knows how to carefully care for our lives. Amen.

¹ William E. Brown in Making Sense of Your Faith. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/e/evil.htm> (accessed July 14, 2011).

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

Bring us peace in the midst of war; guide us to be good in the midst of evil; and help us to trust in your ability to give us salvation. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.