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“The Triumph of the Lazy Landowner”

Sermon Series: Twice Told Tales: Parables for Skeptics

Scripture Lesson: *Matthew 13:24-30*

Sunday, July 8, 2007©

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Jesus Christ is the Lord of the weeds and the wheat.
Let us pray.

Father God we thank you that you have called us here this morning. We thank you for your eternal and everlasting claim on our lives and we ask that you would bless us this morning with an outpouring of your Holy Spirit. Open up to us the treasure of your Word so that we might be forever changed this morning for your glory. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

We get things started with a bang this week. The most pervasive question in theology and philosophy is “Why does God allow evil?” This is an old question, stretching back thousands of years, back at least to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. Given the fact that bad things happen to people consistently in their lives and that evil is ever-present in the world, Epicurus asked the question, “Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Is he able (to prevent evil) but not willing?” Al Pacino, playing the devil in a movie a few years ago put it like this, “If God is so good, where is He? He’s an absentee landlord!”

Is that true? Do these criticisms of God hold water? I don’t think so, but let’s allow God’s Word to teach us this morning.

Jesus used a parable to teach His disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven that day as they sat along the seashore. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a landowner who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat.

When the wheat began to break through the dark earth into the sun, the landowner’s workers were surprised to see weeds growing alongside.

This is true for us as well. We are more often than not surprised by evil. The bad things in this life usually catch us unaware. We wake up and are surprised to find evil in our midst. Does anyone remember the absolute shock when the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building came crashing down in Oklahoma City, or when we first heard that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center? It simply didn’t seem possible, that evil could rise up and poke its head into the bright morning sun in such a way. Of course, we may be more surprised to wake up and discover the presence of evil in our own life; the coworker who suddenly screams in our face, the phone call which comes in the middle of the night, the doctor asking us to sit down for a minute after a routine physical, the drug paraphernalia discovered accidentally in a family member’s dresser drawer. The evil which is the most painful, which wreaks the most havoc, which does the most damage, is the evil which surprises us, which catches us off-guard and unawares.

And our reaction, when evil invades our life, is the same as that of the servants in Jesus’ parable—we want it removed as soon as possible. Evil is an unwelcome guest and we will do whatever we can to shove it out the door. When the master tells the servants that an enemy has sown weeds among the wheat, their immediate response is, “*Do you want us to go and gather up the weeds?*” *Matthew 13:28* To us the response to this question is a no-brainer. Of course we should gather up the weeds. Who

wants weeds in their garden? But Jesus is nothing if He is not surprising. As He does more often than not, Jesus breaks our expectations into little bits. *Matthew 13:28-30* “So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Why does God allow evil to grow in His field, alongside His precious children? Scripture does not give us a general one-size fits all answer. I think what happens over time is that God reveals answers to us about the evil weeds which sprout up seemingly overnight in our own lives. And this parable provides us with some wonderful teaching to sustain us as the weeds grow up around us. I think we can pull away four lessons about how God manages His field and the evil weed which grew in it.

First, God is patient with his crop. The weed which Christ uses in this parable is called darnel. It is a noxious weed that looks a lot like wheat, especially when it first comes up. In fact, young wheat and young darnel are virtually indistinguishable from one another. At harvest, the darnel is easy to spot. Even after harvest, darnel can be used a lot like wheat but with very different results. Darnel, during the time of Christ, was thought to be poisonous. People who ate bread made from darnel were known to get very sick—vomiting, slurred speech, dizziness. The Romans thought that eating darnel made you blind. So there is a lot at stake in making sure that your field is free from darnel. Still, God is patient. He gives the crop plenty of time to show its true self. This is true in our lives as well. *Exodus 34:6-7* “The LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

I was in the airport in Chicago last Saturday morning flying home from Pittsburgh. As I walked past one of the restaurants in the terminal, an employee bussing tables, a small, older man who appeared Indian, dropped a tray of dirty dishes. Sitting close by at a table, a 20-something man pointed at him and

started laughing so loud that everyone in the restaurant could hear. His entire table, three women and two other men, joined in lustily as the man struggled to clean up his mess. It was one of the cruelest things I have seen in a long time. I stood there in the terminal, watching the whole scene unfold and I became very conscious that my heart began to fill with anger. By God’s grace another employee thought more like Christ than I did and came over and helped pick up the mess. I was too busy summing those folks up; instantaneously, almost involuntarily crafting their entire life stories and it was not a pretty picture. But as I walked away shaking my head, another thought came to me, and this was not in my own voice, “Jesus Christ died for them.”

When Augustine preached on this passage he put it like this, “There is this difference between people and real grain and real weeds, for what was grain in the field is grain and what were weeds are weeds. But in the Lord’s field...at times what was grain turns into weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain; and no one knows what they will be tomorrow.”¹ I don’t know about you, but I am glad that God gives second chances. I am glad that God is not impulsive or does not make snap judgments, especially when it comes to His children. I am so glad that God is patient with me and the evil I do. I am glad that by His grace the sum of my life does not equal my actions.

Second, God raises a hearty crop. We are told in verse that that at harvest time that God will gather the crop into His barn but that the weeds will be gathered and burned. We know from this that the crop of wheat grew up strong and hearty. If that was not the case, then the field would simply have been burned, worthless wheat and weeds altogether. Darnel is a noxious weed, which means it is particularly aggressive plant and it just doesn’t co-exist with other plants, it tries to take over and stamp them out. In fact, Christ’s parable may have had it’s origins in a real-life example because of the practice of sowing darnel seed among a good crop of wheat. There are numerous historical examples of people desiring revenge against someone else sowing darnel in wheat fields—often with disastrous results for the farmer. Darnel is that aggressive and pernicious.

But God raises a hearty crop. God's children, when rooted in the rich soil of His Word and watered with the sweet rain of the Holy Spirit, will stand strong against the noxious and pernicious evil of this world. We will never know how strong we are in the Lord until we stand against the very gates of Hell, with its hot, foul wind blowing in our face. We will never know the depths of God's amazing grace and love and how strong we can be in the Lord until we find ourselves clinging by the root to Jesus Christ. *Deuteronomy 33:25-27* instructs us ²⁶"*There is none like God...who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before you and said, Destroy.*" God does not remove right away the weeds from the wheat, but He raises a crop hearty enough in His grace, and love, and Spirit to overcome whatever seeds of evil are sown in the soil around us.

Third, this parable teaches us that God alone does the weeding. The great human temptation is to think that we can get rid of all the weeds, that we can make the world into a perfect place. Many, many groups of people have tried to create a perfect society—a society free from pain and suffering and evil and inequity. Karl Marx wrote "The workers have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to gain!" But Marx blamed Jewish people for all the greed in the world. The Puritans in Salem, Massachusetts, believed that they could create a town free from sin, but instead history remembers them for executing some 24 or so young women who they believed to be witches. Evil men from Adolf Hitler to Osama Bin Laden to Mao Tse-Tung have used the excuse of attempting to create a perfect society to exercise their terror. We want to weed the world, but being somewhat weed-like ourselves, we are simply not equipped. Unlike you may have heard recently, we cannot save the world. That job is reserved for God alone.

I have found myself falling prey to this impulse with Calvin. I have found myself trying to remove the weeds from his young life before they can even take root. When we go out to eat, I pay close attention to the conversations nearby lest any angry, cruel or evil word falls upon his ears. I hate to listen to the news

or talk radio while he is in the car because I don't want him to hear how messed up this world is. I cringed when we passed by a man wearing an obscene t-shirt in the grocery store, even though Calvin cannot read. But this makes no sense because as long as Calvin is raised in a home with human beings, there will be evil in his house. As long as Calvin lives with himself, there will be evil in his house. Just last week a study from the University of Portsmouth in England reported that as early as six-months-old babies learn to deceive.² Of course Scripture has taught us this already. *Psalm 51:5* "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." The worst acts carried out in the name of God and religion have usually been done with the expressed intention of exorcising evil from the world. Weed-killer, in the hands of sinful human beings, usually kills off the wheat as well. God is patient with us and He desires us to wait upon Him to remove the weeds from this world so that we may be witnesses to His power and greatness and grace.

Fourth, God does not wait until the harvest to do all His weeding. We are nearing the end of the sermon now and you may find yourself saying, "This is great news, pastor. I'm glad we can count upon God to weed the world for us. But I can't wait for the Kingdom of Heaven. I live in this world and I've got some big weeds sprouting up around me. I need some serious weeding done now."

Colossians 1:17 tells us that Jesus Christ is before all things and in Him all things hold together. God is always at work watching over His children, holding evil in check. We may never know the surely millions and billions of ways in which God weeds this world. We saw an example of this last weekend where two terrorist attacks in London and another in Glasgow were thwarted by what the press tended to describe as "pure luck." But I don't buy that. I see God weeding. I see the Kingdom of Heaven breaking into this sinful world. In a small village in India on Thursday, a farmer saw a small hand sticking up from the dirt. He uncovered a two-day-old little girl buried alive by her grandfather and great uncle. The Royals got five straight walks to score three runs in the eighth inning and a run-scoring bloop single with two outs in the ninth inning to win last night. There may be no greater feeling than the sure and

certain knowledge that the God of the cosmos intervened on your behalf. These are the signposts in our life which tell us that we are on the right track with God.

There is a story about a woman, a professional woman, a tenure track professor at Stanford University, one of the most prestigious schools in the world. She had worked hard to achieve her doctorate, traveled a lot in doing so, and church and God faded into the background of her life. But this woman had grown up as the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Her mother taught music, played the piano in church on Sundays, and made sure that her daughter could play the piano as well. Let me read for you her description of how the Kingdom of Heaven broke into her life on a routine morning, while she was performing the very routine task of shopping for groceries:

“One Sunday I was in the Lucky’s Supermarket not very far from my house—I will never forget—among the spices—an African-American man walked up to me and said he was buying some things for his church picnic. And he said, ‘Do you play the piano by any chance?’

I said, ‘Yes.’ He said they were looking for someone to play the piano at church. It was a little African-American church right in the center of Palo Alto. A Baptist church. So I started playing for that church. That got me regularly back into churchgoing.”

The man she ran into that Sunday morning was Dale Hamel, a longtime member of Jerusalem Baptist Church, and then president of the choir. According to him, they practically bumped into one another. He noticed her long fingers and the absence of a ring on her wedding ring finger and immediately inquired about her abilities as a pianist. He laughs when asked if he was looking for a pianist or a date but says that he had no idea God

*was using him as an instrument in the life of another soul who had become too busy for God.”*³

That woman’s name is Condoleezza Rice, and in just a couple of years this only child would lose her mother to cancer and she would need to depend upon God more than ever.

What weeds would you like to have removed from your life? Maybe you have struggled to pull them yourself but to no avail. And they are pernicious and noxious and they seem to be taking over. But Jesus Christ is the Lord of the weeds and the wheat. This morning, ask God to make you pull them for you, so that you may produce a harvest of righteousness in His name.

Amen.

¹ Augustine, *Against the Donatists*

² The London Telegraph, “Babies Not As Innocent As They Pretend,” Richard Gray, July 1, 2007.

³ Leslie Montfomery, *The Faith of Condoleezza Rice* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2007) p. 112-113.