

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The 7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2020
“Put it in Context” by Sue Trigger

GOSPEL LESSON Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (CEB)

4 Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. 25 While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away. 26 When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared. 27 “The servants of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Master, didn’t you plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds?’ 28 “‘An enemy has done this,’ he answered. “The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 “But the landowner said, ‘No, because if you gather the weeds, you’ll pull up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvest time I’ll say to the harvesters, “First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn.’”” 36 Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

³⁷ Jesus replied, “The one who plants the good seed is the Human One. 38 The field is the world. And the good seeds are the followers of the kingdom. But the weeds are the followers of the evil one. 39 The enemy who planted them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the present age. The harvesters are the angels. ⁴⁰ Just as people gather weeds and burn them in the fire, so it will be at the end of the present age. ⁴¹ The Human One will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all things that cause people to fall away and all people who sin. ⁴² He will throw them into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father’s kingdom. Those who have ears should hear.”

My hometown, Waterloo, IA, is a small city whose identity is agricultural industry. At its peak, John Deere had 4 plants churning out farm implements. You only have to drive to the edge of town to find corn and bean fields. So it is only natural that my first real job was working out in the fields. Every summer I would spend about 3 weeks waking up at 3 a.m. to meet a bus or a flatbed truck that took us out to the fields where we would work until 4 p.m. in the afternoon or until we finished a field, whichever came first. Most of the time I detasseled corn, when I got older they handed me a knife and I rogued beans. If you were here, I would ask you to raise your hand if you have heard of roguing beans. Some of you may have heard the job called walking beans.

I grew up in NE Iowa, Mitch was from NW Iowa when we met. I called it roguing beans, he called it walking beans. He was always convinced that I was wrong. I decided to Google it before I put it in the sermon today, and guess what! Roguing beans is a legitimate term. You can find on Wikipedia. In the Farmtalk newsletter from Parsons, KS, you can find a whole article on the subject. According to Farmtalk, roguing is a *“retro-farming technique the experts refer to as “hand-roguing.”* ⁱ Experts refer to it as hand-roguing.

If you didn't grow up in agriculture country, you may be wondering why the beans needed to be walked. It's quite simple, it was to remove the rogue weeds and volunteer corn that would crop up with the beans. A clean field means a better yield, or at least an easier harvest. According to Farmtalk, clean fields had "important implications regarding neighbor's opinions — especially those who were also landlords." Any good farmer knows that a clean field is the goal, no weeds.

I imagine that today's parable has wrinkled the brow of many a farmer. Jesus clearly was not a farmer. This part is just wrong, "The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them?' "But the landowner said, 'No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them. Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvest time I'll say to the harvesters, "First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn.'"" Any good farmer knows that you either need a crew of rogues or some pesticides, but you never let the weeds bother the beans.

His listeners would have caught the problem with the story, too. There would have been plenty of farmers in the crowd, and most people would have had a garden at home. They would have all understood the challenge of keeping rogue plants out. (*I'm going to keep using that word.*)

Jesus wasn't offering agricultural advice though, he was teaching about the kingdom of Heaven. "The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away." The parable is often called The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. It is one of the great judgement stories of the bible. For those of us who lean toward the 'grace' side of the church, we tend to get a little uncomfortable with judgment passages. We prefer to skip straight to the grace and forgiveness part. Today we're going to spend some time with the judgment part because God's judgement is real. It's important that we understand how God's judgement works.

When we look at a parable we often try to place ourselves in the story. Which character am I? Am I the householder, the good seed, the weeds, the field, the slaves, or the enemy that secretly plants weeds at night? Thankfully, Jesus gave us the answer. The Son of Man is the householder, the field is the world, the good seed is children of the kingdom, the weeds are the children of the evil one, the angels are the reapers, and the harvest is the end of the age where the angels will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers. We are either the good seed or the weeds. Right? We all know that at any given moment we are one or the other. None of us is perfect. We all have moments when we do well and serve God faithfully. We all have moments when we sin and fail to do what God asks of us. Does this make me an evildoer? Am I a cause of sin? By the letter of the law, yes! That's a frightening thought. It makes you wonder just what God's judgement looks like? Is it really a burning fire or is that a metaphor in the parable?

I want you to think of something you took lessons to learn to do. Perhaps you learned to dance or do yoga; play an instrument or sing; play a sport or learn a language. Think of your thing. When you began learning to do your thing, could you do it well the first time? Not likely. Becoming skilled at anything takes time and practice.

Now I want you to think about your relationship with your teacher. If you've had more than one, think of your favorite teacher. My mom tells the story of her piano teacher who used to hit her hands with a ruler when she made a mistake. That is not the teacher we're looking for. Now that you are thinking of your teacher, I want you to answer this question. Who was the hardest on you when you made a mistake, you or your teacher? I am guessing that most of you said that you were. We all tend to be our own worst critics. I studied voice at the University of Iowa when I was in High School. Dr. Matheson was my teacher. One time I was preparing to audition for a tri-state competition for an audience of talent scouts for colleges and universities. When I would make a mistake, we would rehearse and rehearse until I got it right. The biggest obstacle was never my ability to sing the song, it was always the judgement that was going on in my head. One day he sat me down and asked what I wanted to do with my voice. He helped me see the possibilities and showed me how he could help me achieve them. After that conversation, I realized that while I was judging my mistakes as failure, he was judging my possibilities.

So often when we read this parable we get stuck in the weeds. We get caught up in the hope that we are good seeds and the fear of burning in the fire, that we miss the message of grace. Nichole Torbitzky, professor of religion at Lindenwood University can help us get out of the weeds. She wrote, "The grace of this passage is that we are already living in the Kingdom of God. It is not something that happens at the judgment when the angels come to separate the wheat and weeds. Right now, God's kingdom contains us all. Wheat and weeds and those for who it is still too early to tell the difference. The Kingdom of Heaven is right now, full of all of our struggles. God who loves us, is aware of our struggles with evil and sin. But God, who can sow the good seed, cannot sprout and grow for us. We are responsible for our own growth. This is the loving judgment of God. This is the judgment that calls us to our best possibility.

It does not mean we destructively compare ourselves to others or even to ourselves when we were at a different place in our lives, but we are called to be the best we can be now. This kind of judgment can be very scary to those of us who are not used to practicing it, because it makes us responsible for our actions. If there is no perfect score card holding up impossible standards, then we cannot blame God for when we fail. My yoga instructor says, we don't come to class to torture ourselves, so if I go to class and have a

torturous class even though I have been taught how to keep that from happening, then it is my responsibility to change my attitude. It is not my instructor's fault. I cannot blame him, I am responsible for my actions.

Since God works with us from where we are, calling us to the best possibility, then it is not God's fault if we fail to reach it, it is our responsibility. If there is no perfect score card and we are responsible for our choices, then there is also no predetermined course of events set out by God from the beginning of time that means we had no choice and once again, we cannot blame God for the choices we have made."ⁱⁱ

Wow! That's a lot to consider. Torbitzky shows us that the judgement of God does not look like the judgement we know in the world, or even the judgement we may have learned from one school of theology. She has helped us see God's grace.

The kingdom of God is a not a place of impossible standards. Sometimes, we like to think that it is impossible because then we aren't responsible for our actions. But God's standards are not impossible for us, and God is working with us in the context of where we are, and guiding us to what we can be. Is there judgement from God? Yes. But God's judgement comes from a place of love. God's judgement recognizes and respects the depths of each person so that we can be called to task in those places where we should be stretching, strengthening, trusting and learning. Just like your favorite teacher who helped you to grow and learn. God loves us always, and constantly calls us to live into our possibilities.

The parable of the wheat and weeds reminds us that Jesus never leaves us with judgment as the last word. Yes, we will struggle with the weeds of sin and evil but the judgement God offers is not destructive. Jesus didn't tell the crowd of people this parable because they were all a bunch of rogue weeds he was going to send to hell. He also didn't tell them the story because they were all perfect. He told the parable to open their eyes to the possibilities.

Many of us have been taught that this parable means that God is a harsh judge and we better get it right or we're going to burn. That's a very punitive image of God, far different from a God of love who is calling us to be the very best we can be. Jesus offered us a message far more life giving in this parable. God, who loves us, has already placed us in the Kingdom of Heaven, our job is to do what we can to make that kingdom as little work for the angel reapers as possible. Let's choose the possibilities.

ⁱ Parker, Mark, "Walkin' Beans", Jul 29, 2014 Updated Aug 29, 2014,

https://www.farmtalknewspaper.com/news/walkin-beans/article_5d53f873-2e14-5054-a0e0-2e59432055c6.html

ⁱⁱ Torbitzky, Nichole, Real Spirituality for Real Life: Faith in Process, <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-seventh-sunday-after-pentecost-proper-11-year-a-19-july-2020/>.