

Weeds and Wheat

“Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?” He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.’”

How is this for polite dinner conversation? “The church is just full of hypocrites! How can I believe in God when the people who go to church steal and cheat and lie? It’s because of religion that we have so many wars and so much hatred!” To which I reply: “I’m afraid you are right. I cannot argue the point. Would you please pass me the salt? Yes, the Church and all institutional religion is full of weeds, there is no doubt. Both past and present bear witness to this sorrowful fact. The Church in this sense is a reflection of the world around it. All kinds inhabit the planet. Some people make the world more beautiful and delightful to live in and others make you weep for the senseless evil they do to innocence and beauty. Matthew is trying to tell us something important, but what with all the talk of evil doers being cast into the fiery furnace and the weeping and gnashing of teeth and all it seems like we have a pretty clear idea of God’s position on this question! But we know with Jesus that the answer is never that simple. “Where did these weeds come from?” the laborers ask. “An enemy has done this,” the Master says. Then do you want us to go out and gather them? No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest...” Let both of them grow together until the harvest? What did he say? It appears the evil weeds cannot stop the healthy wheat from growing, but try to pluck out the weeds from amid the wheat and you have the potential for disaster. I think we can all think of those times when the Church ignored this advice and the blood of thousands flowed in God’s name. You see, when we, the “good” people of the church use violence to achieve God’s purposes, we do all and more than evil itself ever could hope to achieve on its own. But is it God’s desire that we stand around and do nothing when evil makes itself known? I don’t think so. But it seems like this parable might be trying to say that violence in response to evil is not just dangerous to the wheat but that it’s also just plain ineffective. What does our history tell us? Has a holy war or crusade or massacre or a guillotine or the bombing of an abortion clinic ever made the world a better place? So how do we, as those who profess to love Christ, fight evil? Now I can think of a lot of complex philosophical answers to this question, but if I’m going to learn anything from Jesus it looks like the difficult answer is that we just don’t.

I know---- this doesn’t make any sense to me either---that’s why the parables can make us crazy! They actually make us have to think deeply and step outside of our need for easy answers. Perhaps all this has something to do with resisting evil more than fighting it. And, of course, Jesus is always going on and on about forgiveness, surely that’s part of the equation. I’m reminded that when evil came at Jesus full force and demanded his life in a bloody sacrifice that his response from the cross was not retribution, but forgiveness, “forgive them Father for they know not what they do.” But still, we could argue that we are not Jesus and that level of forgiveness is unattainable in the real world of today---we must fight fire with fire. But let’s not give up too quickly. What might this kind of forgiving resistance in the face of evil look like today and how could it have any real power. Perhaps it is in the resisting the violence of others as well as restraining the violence within ourselves, that we are able to bring new life and new justice to a weedy world in a way that shouted of God’s hope and integrity.

I would have to call this phenomenon active, life giving resistance. This kind of active, loving resistance not only inaugurates justice, but it transforms a whole lot of the weeds as well. I have to think that all of this has something to do with Jesus is teaching us. Each and every day in each of our lives we encounter a thousand tiny choices about whether we will fight fire with fire.

I may never have to defend against true evil, but I know I'll have a thousand chances to forgive someone who cuts me off in traffic or show mercy to someone who may not deserve it.

The world wants to tell us perhaps that God is irrelevant and that the Church has failed, but all the same they sure do keep their eyes on us to see how we are acting in the world.--- as my experience at countless dinner parties attests.

Yes, the church is full of both wheat and weeds---but the truth is that nobody can really tell the difference between the two----- that is---unless we show them.

Each day is a brand-new day. Each of us has a fresh chance to show the world what it looks like to be wheat---glorious, tall growing wheat that believes that God can handle the weeds, while we do all in our ability to offer light to a world in darkness.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+