

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - July 19, 2020

Weeds or Wheat, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister, Old South Church in Boston
Based on Matthew 13. 24-30

When we encounter the great contests of the Bible, those between good and evil, right and wrong, oppressor and oppressed – David verses Goliath, the oppressed Hebrews verses the Egyptian oppressors, Moses verses Pharaoh, Jesus verses the Pharisees – we invariably identify with the good guys who are also invariably the underdogs. We are David not Goliath, Peter not Judas, John the Baptist not Herod, the oppressed not the oppressors.

Erna Kim Hackett calls this “Disney Princess theology”. Bad theology. She goes on to write, “For citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see themselves (ourselves) as the enslaved Hebrews and not Egypt ... is a perfect example of Disney princess theology. And it means that as people in power, they (we) have no lens for locating themselves (ourselves) rightly in Scripture or society ... it has made them (us) blind and utterly ill-equipped to engage issues of power and injustice. It is...” she concludes, “some very weak Bible work.”

What if we tried doing “strong” Bible work today? Bear with me. It won’t be easy.

What if in today’s parable – the parable of the weeds among the wheat -- we located ourselves not with the wheat, but with the weeds.

In the interest of a relentlessly radical Jesus, who preaches and teaches uncomfortable truths - what if we imagined ourselves the weeds, not the wheat in today’s parable ... the chokers, not the choked, the invaders not the invaded? Now, I know this isn’t any fun. It doesn’t feel good. It’s uncomfortable. No one wants to be weeds.

The parable tells of a real Middle Eastern weed: the tare or darnel which, in its infancy, looks to all the world – even to a trained eye, to a farmer’s eye – like wheat. But it’s not wheat. As it grows, it insinuates its roots around those of the wheat, so that by the time it reaches a mature stage – the stage when it is distinguishable from the wheat - it’s too late to be weeded out. If you pull up the weeds they will take the wheat with them. Moreover, if consumed, these weeds – these tares or darnel – are somewhat poisonous.

In the end, the wheat and these noxious weeds can only be separated after they are harvested. In the meantime, they live and grow together in close proximity, often indistinguishable.

The story – like a lot of Jesus’s stories -- is good news to the underdogs, the innocent, the blameless, and the victims. It is great good news to those denied justice, to those being choked, suffocated, and oppressed in this world. The good news is this: if not in this world where they suffer, then in the next, God will right wrongs, justice will be served; reward and punishment will be meted out. . . and the innocent, the oppressed will have, both their day and their reward.

The parable is about the church. It suggests that good and the bad exist together. Even in the church. Even among us. And, this: they cannot always be clearly distinguished.

Augustine of Hippo was an early church father – an African Father – whose life spanned the 4th and 5th centuries. Augustine of Hippo, St. Augustine, used a Latin phrase, *corpus permixtum* to describe the church. *Corpus permixtum* meaning: we are a mixed body; a combined, confused, mingled body of good and evil. Augustine was admitting, and attesting that the church isn't perfect. We aren't perfect. We are not pure. We are tainted.

Today, post-Freud, we would allow that each of us, as individuals, is a *corpus permixtum*, mixtures of both good and evil, brave and cowardly, innocent and guilty, generous and miserly, blameless and compromised, Good Samaritan and the one who walks by, averting our gaze. We are imperfect Christians. And this: (let us say it) despite our best efforts, despite our good intentions, we are captive to our own self-interests.

I have been reading the parable of the Weeds and the Wheat in the light of a best-selling book, by Ibram X. Kendi: [How to Be an Anti-racist](#). I suspect some of you have read it or are reading it. It has been atop the New York Times best seller list for a while now. At Old South Church it is our all-church summer read. It is not an easy book, but it is an important book. It is an important book right now, as race, racism, antiracism, privilege, equity are at the heart and center of this painful, important season of national reckoning. Racism is a catastrophe.

In his book Kendi reflects on his experience as a young student ... a student with “a heightened sensitivity to the glares from White teachers who saw my Black body not as a plant to be cultivated, but as a weed to be plucked out of their school and thrown into their prison” (p. 82)

In the previous chapter, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said: *If you are not with me, you are against me.* (Matthew 12:30)

Ibram Kendi makes a similar claim, a parallel claim. He says: If you are not an antiracist ...if you are not with and about antiracism, then you're for it. Or you're okay with it, you're permitting it, which is the same thing.

It is not enough to say, “I'm not a racist.” If I am not an antiracist, am I not among the weeds?

Since 1619, since the first Africans arrived on this soil – uprooted from home and family and country, captured, chained, transported, bought and sold – since 1619 racism has been a catastrophe for people of color. If I am not actively working to right this centuries-old wrong, am I not among the weeds, the invaders and chokers, the asphyxiators and oppressors?

Now, I am not going to leave us there: invader weeds with no hope of repentance or redemption. Church: there is always hope! It is never too late to turn, to repent.

Theologian Frederick Buechner has written that the Christian Gospel is always *bad* news before it is *good* news. (*Telling the Truth: the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*)

The Gospel is first the news that we are sinners, to use an old, biblical word. It is the news that we are human, flawed, imperfect, complicit, self-oriented. We are, each of us, a *corpus permixtum*.

But, the Christian Gospel is also, always and relentlessly, good news. It bears witness to the news that we are loved anyway; flawed yet cherished; guilty, yes, but also forgiven; bleeding to be sure, but also bled for. We reach for the stars, but we are bound to the earth.

It is good news that in this parable, the weeds – the invasive, choking intruder – isn't immediately plucked up and sent to hell. The weeds are given the gift of time. Time to repent, time to turn toward Christ; time to face into – to see, to name, to confess – our own complicities as imperfect, impure, compromised human beings. Time to uncouple ourselves from Disney Princess Theology. Time to stop seeing ourselves as the good guys and the underdogs. Time to do hard, honest, strong biblical work. Time to locate ourselves rightly in Scripture and society. Time to open our eyes and our hearts to engage issues of power and injustice... for such issues are close to the heart of God.

This I believe: a great contest is upon us. In this important season of national reckoning, a fierce battle is being waged: a battle between right and wrong, good and evil, justice and oppression. It is being waged on our streets, in our courts, among legislators, between mayors and police departments, in housing and criminal justice system. The battle is joined in one of the great contests of American history. The soul of our nation is at stake.

This I believe: that we are right now in the throes of nothing less than a Third Reconstruction.

The First Reconstruction: post-Civil War. The building of schools and colleges for persons who had previously been enslaved. The rebuilding of national and state economies not based on slave labor. The First Reconstruction moved the ball of justice down the field, but it didn't get close to the goal. Moreover, every effort at giving persons wrapped in dark skin equality and justice were met with vicious and violent backlashes.

The Second Reconstruction: The Civil Rights Movement. Again the ball of justice was moved further down the field: the voting rights act, desegregation, and more. But again, these efforts were met with vicious and violent backlashes.

A case in point, John Lewis – the Conscience of Congress – today of blessed memory, a was arrested forty-five times and beaten repeatedly by the police and by white supremacists, despite his commitment, firm, unyielding, biblical commitment, to non-violent direct action. Despite this, John Lewis refused despair. He acknowledged the darkest chapters of American history – with his own body he felt the crushing, dangerous menace of racism. Yet as a Christian he insisted that change was always possible. He refused to give up on people like us.

The Rev. William J Barber II, a spiritual descendent of John Lewis and Martin Luther Kings, Jr. argues we are in the throes of nothing less than a Third Reconstruction. Like John Lewis, Barber has seen the worst, yet still hopes for the best.

Racism is high and deep and wide. It is huge, pervasive, invasive, mean, merciless, suffocating, noxious. If we are not actively battling it, we are enabling it, permitting it.

The biblical word – biblical Hebrew word -- for righteous is used interchangeably with justice. In the Hebrew Scriptures, righteousness and justice are the same. One cannot be righteous without doing justice.

Ready yourself for the battle. Be on the right side: on the side of God, of history, of justice. It's never too late.

Hear God's Good News: We are not destined to be weeds. We, too, can be wheat.