

“God Wants All of Us”

July 23, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:24-30

I’ve read and heard this story from Jesus many, many times over the years. I like it. I’ve always liked the idea of wheat and weeds growing together and being allowed to coexist in the field. But I just learned something new about it that really changed my perspective. Whenever I’ve imagined the wheat field Jesus describes I see wheat and weeds growing together but easily separated from one another. The weeds could be pulled out only they’re close to the wheat, so it was a little risky. Turns out, though, the word used for weeds in Greek actually refers to a particular type of weed.

It’s known as darnel, its scientific name is *Lolium temulentum*, and it is indistinguishable from wheat in its early stages. Looks just like wheat. And it is toxic. A little of it added to beer, which some have been known to do, makes the beer very inebriating. But if a person ingested a lot of it, say ground down into flour for bread, it will kill them. So, what Jesus is describing is a situation where an enemy has tossed something poisonous among the wheat that can’t really be found by outward appearances.

He says this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It’s like a field that, even though is planted with good seed, is still vulnerable to the influence of bad seed. Even God’s kingdom isn’t immune to the forces of evil. But in our efforts to root it out, to purify the kingdom, we can do much more harm than good. We see that unfolding all around us. When a group has been identified by some as impure or unworthy, say undocumented immigrants or transgender students, there are attempts to weed them out, to uproot them. And the harm done by those efforts is immense. Families get splintered, people are traumatized. And it reinforces a vision of the world that says we are locked in an endless battle of good vs. evil and it’s easy to tell who is who.

But that’s not the world we live in. Because God’s kingdom is made up of people it can never be an either/or world. No one is either all good or all bad. We’re all both/and; we all carry within us both good and evil. And when we begin to target others based on outward appearances that we perceive as wrong or unnatural, we deny their full humanity and diminish our own. If there is any sorting to do, Jesus seems to say, it’s not up to us to do it. Our job is to coexist, to live peaceably alongside each other. To grow together.

For people who crave absolute certainty, who look at the world through a binary lens, that’s a hard truth to accept. But in the kingdom of heaven, in a world where God’s presence is known and felt and expressed, it’s a truth we are called to embrace. Recently I’ve been reading Father Richard Rohr’s book *Eager to Love*, it’s a study of the way of St. Francis of Assisi. He has a chapter called “Integration of the Negative.” Francis emphasized the need to embrace our negative selves, to understand that who we are includes those aspects of ourselves we would rather reject. Rohr writes, “I suppose there is no more counterintuitive spiritual idea than the possibility that God might actually *use and find necessary* what we fear, deny and deem unworthy.”

I hear an appreciation for that idea in the psalm that's assigned for this Sunday along with the Genesis reading, Psalm 139: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." That is, God seeks out every aspect of who we are, our highest heights and our lowest lows. There's no dimension of us God rejects. Like a field planted with good seeds and yet infected with weeds, we are wholly claimed by God. That's why I say God wants all of us. I don't mean just every one of us, but all that each of us is. God wants even those parts of us we try to keep hidden from God, those parts of us we're ashamed of or frightened of. God wants it all; seeks us out and knows us.

We learn that especially through the story of Jacob. We encounter Jacob today at a moment of insight and enlightenment. But we need to know his whole story to really appreciate what's happening to him. Jacob has spent his life scheming and lying and manipulating in order to get ahead. He was the twin brother of Esau, slightly younger, but very different in appearance. I had friends growing up who were fraternal twins. One had very curly, sandy hair and the other had very straight dark hair; they didn't look anything alike, in fact complete opposites of one another. That's how Jacob and Esau were. And it extended even to their interests and abilities. Esau was a hunter and outdoorsman. Jacob was a homebody, liked to cook and keep to himself.

You remember, I'm sure, one day Esau came home from hunting and was famished. Jacob was cooking some stew that smelled delicious, so Esau asked him for a bowl. Instead of just giving it to him, though, Jacob offered to sell it to him for Esau's "birthright," basically giving up his place as the firstborn. Esau sold it off, giving an advantage to Jacob. Later, as their father Isaac lay dying and his sight had left him, Jacob's mother, Rebecca, instructed him to impersonate Esau and receive the blessing meant for Esau from Isaac before he died. The deception worked and Jacob was named as Isaac's sole heir. When Esau got wind of that he was furious and threatened to kill Jacob, which is why we meet Jacob on his way to Haran to live with Rebecca's brother Laban.

So, Jacob's on the run, trying to escape the consequences of his own actions. So far Jacob is not a worthy person. He lies, he cheats, he steals, and he seems to enjoy every minute of it. He's not ashamed of it; he embraces it! Of all the people we meet in the stories of Genesis, Jacob should be the least attractive to God. Yet he is God's guy. He's the one God chooses. Unless we think that this story is more about *where* Jacob is than *who* he is, which makes no sense to me, we have to believe that God chooses Jacob because he is a scoundrel. Somehow Jacob embodies the weeds and the wheat growing together and God wants it all. You notice there's no instruction to Jacob to make amends for his past; in fact, there's no mention of his guilt. He is who he is up to that moment. The question is who will he be after this encounter.

In the teachings of St. Francis integrating the negative isn't meant to encourage us to give in to our more negative impulses. We're meant to acknowledge them and accept them as part of who we are. And to let that awareness of our negative dimensions keep us humble and non-judgmental of the negative aspects we may see in others. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, Jesus teaches the crowd, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see

the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye." Removing the log from my own eye is a lifelong task. If I spend my days integrating the negative within me, learning to acknowledge it and embrace it, rather than spending my energy resisting or denying or projecting it on others, I won't have time to remove specks from other people's eyes. I won't have time to waste judging other people for who they are. It's all I can do to know who I am.

In the kingdom of heaven we all know who we are, fully embracing our whole selves, and we all have a place and are valued. God searches us and knows us, the wheat and the weed of us. And that's the good news Jesus brings. He tells his disciples and anyone with ears to hear they are loved for who they are, as they are. And they are all invited to love others in the same way. Even though at times the good seed can get contaminated by weeds, even though at times our negative selves spill over and we say or do things that are harmful, still God insists we are loved. And if we're able to internalize that love, to accept God's acceptance of us, then there's a chance we can accept those around us. We can stop trying to uproot one another, stop trying to purify the field.

Because God wants all of us, every part of us, we no longer need to hide and tremble; we no longer need to lash out and punish. Let yourself grow in this kingdom, in this field where wheat and weed can live alongside each other, where they can live within you. Learn to embrace your negative facets, those parts of you that cause you dread. God loves you, all of you, and there's no length to which God will not go to have you.

Amen