

You know, one of the tendencies we human beings have is that we want to fix things. When we come across something that is broken, damaged, incomplete, or somehow just not the way we think it should be, we want to make it better. And, of course, we apply this tendency to people as well, especially when we see someone doing bad things; we want to step in and make it right.

This is one of the reasons that of all the parables Jesus tells, this one about the weeds growing among the wheat irritates me the most. In many situations, I want what the farmhands in this story are ready to do, pull up the weeds, throw the bums out, see the world free from the latest set of scumbags, and do all this immediately. But that is not how the story goes. The landowner won't allow such direct action. In the face of this, maybe we need to look at the story more carefully.

The gardeners among us may raise a suspicious eyebrow at not pulling out the weeds until harvest time. Certainly, this is no way to run a farm. But consider that the weeds that have grown up in the wheat field, probably bearded dandel, are an annual grass that looks very much like wheat. Distinguishing one from another in the early stages of growth is nearly impossible. As the plants mature, the roots of weeds and wheat intertwine and become almost inseparable. Yet separating them at some point is necessary. Unless the weeds are removed, then the flour made from the wheat will be ruined by the weeds, which are both bitter and mildly toxic. The sensible solution is to harvest the plants, spread them on a flat surface, and then remove the weeds, which by this stage are a different color than the wheat.

This brings us back to something the landowner says. "Let both of them grow together until the harvest." This may make sense to us in the context of growing wheat in a field where there are weeds. Where it causes us problems is elsewhere in the world, where we want to clean house, or at least expect God to do so.

From our perspective, who are the weeds growing like crazy in the wheat field of the world? These are the plants we want to yank out by the roots. These are the people we want to lock up and then throw away the key. These are the people we want to punish. These are the people we want to bomb into oblivion. There are times when many of us, at least momentarily, see this as the obvious solution. We want the wheat field of the world to flourish with wheat and not to be scarred by weeds. Or we may redirect our rage, our impotence, our despair into a question about God. Why doesn't God do something about those people, whoever they are? Where is God when they commit their horrible crimes?

The parable does not deny that there are weeds in the wheat. It does not suggest for a moment that the world is free from evil. Instead, the weeds are all too visible and obvious. The landowner knows what has happened, "An enemy has done this!" Yes, the world is a terribly broken place. What is meant to be a healthy wheat field also contains countless weeds. And so we hear from the landowner, "Let both grow together until the harvest." This may baffle us. It sounds as if the landowner is resigned to letting his fertile field become little more than a weed patch.

It is interesting that the original Greek word here, "aphiemi," is one with a wide range of meanings. One major meaning appears in our translation, "let," in the sense of allow or permit. Another major meaning is "pardon" or "forgive." This is the meaning used when the word appears in the Lord's Prayer in that line where we say, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." If this is so, then this

parable invites us to the difficult place of costly discipleship, and there is always a cost to following Jesus. The very real evil that others do is not to be answered by pulling out the weeds, nor by attacking and destroying the people responsible. Doing so only adds to the harm. Instead, our response is to be forgiveness and a willingness to trust in the purposes of God. In this view, God, the landowner, practices forgiveness and patience. And by his example, the same approach is recommended to us. Certainly, this patience and forgiveness appear to be how God functions in the world. Look around you and see everywhere in the world the weeds and the wheat growing together, sometimes in dramatic, horrible ways, sometimes in ordinary, more subtle, everyday ways.

And when it comes to you and me, if we are honest, we have to admit that sometimes we are wheat, and sometimes we are the weeds. God has given us all amazing latitude to make choices, to do right, and even to do wrong to the point of inflicting grievous harm on others and upon ourselves. And God does not pull people out of the swamp of their mistakes by condemning them but by forgiving them. It is a strange way to run the world, I tell you, and sometimes it seems outrageous. Often, we would like the Lord to hurl thunderbolts, only at our enemies, of course. But the record indicates that God works differently than that. The most convincing entry in this record is the story of Jesus. What does he teach? Nowhere does he ever suggest that in this life, we get paid back in kind for the evil we have done. Instead, he goes around telling strange parables about patience and forgiveness, like that one today about a landowner who allows the weeds and wheat to grow together through the many months leading up to harvest. But Jesus doesn't rest content with parables. When his enemies nail him to the cross, he forgives them. Risen from the dead, he forgives those disciples who skipped out on him during his hour of need and sets them up in the business of spreading his forgiveness to anybody who needs it, which is to say, everybody.

Yes, there is something greater than justice here. There is divine forgiveness, the willingness to let weeds and wheat grow together for a season because they are somehow inseparable, and the recognition that revenge resolves nothing but only increases evil. It is clear from this parable, clearer still from the cross, that forgiveness and forbearance are God's way of working with a broken world. This approach may leave us profoundly frustrated, even at odds with God, but without this forbearance, this forgiveness, not one of us stands a chance.

Our preoccupation with the weeds must not prevent us from recognizing the wondrous conclusion of the parable, how, indeed, the harvest happens, an abundance of wheat is gathered in, enough to make landowner and farm hands rejoice together. The weeds in the field have no power to stop the realization of this bounty. The seed was good, and it bore, through adversity, a fruitful harvest. And so, the parable ends on a note of brilliant triumph about that harvest, "the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

We wish the Greatest Commandment went something like this, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself, and also beat the crap out of the bad guys for me!" We say, "Lord, the world is a mess; please fix it." The voice from heaven says, "It will all be OK." We say, "Lord, when will the evil be defeated and the good rewarded?" That voice says, "It will all be OK." We insist, "Lord, there is so much pain, hunger, suffering, and crime in your world." The voice says, "It will all be OK. Trust me."

Evil is real, but it is not ultimate. It never has the last word. I came across a remarkable prayer written by a person who, while experiencing the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, found faith and hope

enough to write a prayer. This prayer points us past the enemy's evil action to the wonder of the harvest. It confirms that the landowner's restraint is not foolishness but wisdom.

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill but also those of ill will.

But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted; remember the fruits we have found thanks to this suffering, our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all of this, and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have born be their forgiveness."