

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2020
Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43
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An Unexpected Enemy

Last week I asked you if any of you were admired by your neighbors for having a green thumb. Today I wonder if any of you have known resentment from others for being successful, or because you tried to do the right thing.

The Parable of the Weeds speaks of enemies. Those who are against one and even actively will oppose and try to undermine one's efforts.

The set up for this parable is clear enough. A farmer has his laborers plant a field with good, clean seed. The result should be a uniform growth of those plants that will yield the desired harvest. If you drive by a grain field, you know right away if the planted seed was clean. The stalks of grain will produce heads that wave in the breeze, slowly ripening to the point where it is time to bring the harvest in. It is also easy to see if the seed was not all that clean. Then, above the heads of waving grain will rise other plants seeking the sun so as to reproduce their own kind. Since they are in a field intended for one harvest, they are weeds, regardless of their beauty or utilitarian value.

In the parable the servants of the farmer ask, "How did this happen? We know you took great care and expense to plant good seed. Where did the weeds come from? What went wrong?"

That character in the parable replied, "An enemy did this."

This is an enemy willing to attempt to sabotage one's efforts to seek their own advantage, or commit an act of revenge for a wrong experienced or merely perceived.

"No good deed goes unpunished."

You have heard that saying, haven't you. It is part of this teaching, for remember Jesus didn't say, "Let me tell you a story about a farmer I knew." He said, "The kingdom of heaven is like ..."

This parable about the kingdom of heaven is fair warning, that to the one who seeks to live his or her life in accord with the values of the dominion of God, according to the teachings and the example of Jesus, for those who seek to embody in their actions and attitudes the fulfillment of the command to love one's neighbor — while you might think that would garner you a good reputation and admiration from all your neighbors, Jesus says once again that it will draw out enemies.

Last week I tried to warn you of accepting too simple an understanding for parables. That warning still stands when we consider this saying. On the surface, in addition to enemies Jesus speaks of a judgement day coming, and so suggests that we might rest assured that even if in the present our enemies get away with their destructive deeds, they will "get it in the end, gathered, bound and burned."

That understanding is easy to arrive at on a first reading. The problem with arriving and staying there is we don't take the opportunity to think more deeply.

One of the principles Luther counseled for understanding the Bible, especially parts that are more difficult, was to "let scripture interpret scripture". It is both a warning of not seeing one passage as being the final word on a topic, but searching for how the whole witness of scripture informs our understanding of an issue.

One way I was taught in my student days to do that was to explore how a word might be used in other contexts within a book, or within the whole of the scripture. This parable has a word worthy of such consideration.

It is "enemy", or in the Greek *exthros*. This word is used four times in the Gospel of Matthew, once here in this passage, and in three other places. What might be a "fleshed out" understanding of enemy as taught by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel?

The first use of *exthros* comes from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5 Jesus references our enemies and counsels us to "love them and pray for them."

This is a helpful reminder. The seeds we sow for the dominion of heaven are seeds of reconciliation. But they are not only the seeds that affirm our being made right with God in spite of our brokenness. They are also seeds that will see us made right with one another. The goal of the Christian faith is not for us to defeat our enemies, but to transform our enemies. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it well in his collection of sermons, "*Strength to Love*"; The reason we do not respond to violence with violence, and suffer the blows reigned down by those who oppose us is that our goal is not to just win the battle for Civil Rights, it is to win the hearts of those who terrorize us, and see them transformed from our enemies into our friends.

The second use of *exthros* we heard a few weeks ago from Matthew 10. When Jesus was preparing his disciples to go out and do the work that he had been doing, he forewarned them of opposition and said, "sometimes your enemies will be those of your own house".

That is a good warning, especially in our time and context. It is no secret that our society is being challenged by forces that seek to divide and confuse us, and in place of trust and goodwill leave chaos and uncertainty. Virtually nothing today in America can be kept from becoming a partisan issue. That is true even in the community of faith. Take the issue of wearing masks during this pandemic.

There are certain things that can be said about masks. They feel uncomfortable, and they are hot. It is sometimes hard to understand what others are saying when wearing them, and because they hide our smiles and our frowns, they prevent us from catching important non-verbal clues. However, they also lower considerably the chance that this nasty virus we are fighting will jump from one person to the next, and so interrupt this pathogen's life-cycle.

Yet they have been made a partisan issue. Some ignore the issue of public health and falsely claim that mask wearing is about individual liberty. Let's be clear about this, speaking Biblically, such division are weeds sown by an enemy. They are not reflective of the kingdom of heaven, which emphasizes love for one another as a far higher standard than me getting my own way. Sometimes your enemy will be those of your own house, or community, or workplace or congregation.

The third use of *exthros* is our text today, the “enemy” has sowed a counter crop amidst the seeds of the kingdom of heaven, and we are instructed not to try to rip them out of the community, lest we do so in a way that does more damage than good. We are, to return to Matthew 5, to pray for them, love them and trust that God can deal with them in God’s own time.

The final use of *exthros* in Matthew is found in chapter 22. The passage ends a series of trick questions and scenarios used to challenge and attempt to “trip up Jesus” by the groups in Jerusalem who opposed his message. Jesus quotes Psalm 110, attributed to David in which the Psalmist says that God will, in the end, put the Messiah’s “enemies under his feet”, a poetic reference to their defeat.

So judgment is again a part of the use of *ethros*, but what is the judgement described. Will the sower of weeds among the wheat be finally punished, or brought to submission after being conflicted of his destructive choices? Will the enemy be incarcerated, or be transformed into one who recognizes the value and rightness of the kingdom of heaven? The scripture doesn’t say, except to affirm that God’s intentions will finally prevail.

But shortly after this saying Jesus will go on to something that looks like anything but victory, conquest and being proven right. Awaiting him is his suffering and death. The Christian must always remember that Jesus defeats his enemies, not through power and overwhelming force, but through weakness and suffering that is strengthened by love for those who would sow weeds among his wheat.

Allow me to end this homily with insights from the late Fr. Henri Nouwen, who addresses the relationship between power and weakness in the kingdom of God. Nouwen writes:

God chose to enter into human history in complete weakness. That divine choice forms the center of the Christian faith. In Jesus of Nazareth, the powerless God appeared among us to unmask the illusion of power, to disarm the prince of darkness who rules the world, and to bring the divided human race to a new unity. It is through total and unmitigated powerlessness that God shows us divine mercy. . . . It is very hard—if not impossible—for us to grasp this divine mercy. We keep praying to the “almighty and powerful God.” But all might and power is absent from the One who reveals God to us saying: “When you see me, you see the Father.” If we truly want to love God, we have to look at the man of Nazareth, whose life was wrapped in weakness. And his weakness opens for us the way to the heart of God.

May you be good seed, planted in good soil, and bear witness in your life to what it means to live under the reign of God.