July 20, 2014 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost

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Today’s Gospel from Matthew is forcing me to talk about a difficult topic. It’s one that many rational Episcopalians like to think that they’re too…well…rational to talk about in any serious way. But there it is like a big elephant right in the middle of another of Jesus’ parables about farming.

That topic is evil. I freely confess, right at the outset, that I don’t quite know what to think about it myself. Oh sure, I’m convinced that there is evil in the world – you’d have to be hiding under a rock to not know htat, what with all the terrible things going on in the world even just this week.

But Jesus talks in his parable about an enemy, an evil one. A person, or at least a being, who’s whole purpose is to do evil. And, in the case of the wheat and the weeds, purposeful, malicious, evil.

The word for weeds in this passage is *dzidzania*. It’s a specific kind of weed known as darnel, or spurious wheat. There’s a version of it that grows in South Dakota called Persian darnel. Though we now have herbicides to kill darnel, there was nothing in first century Palestine to prevent it from growing right up with the wheat. And as Matthew accurately points out, it can’t be distinguished from good wheat until the grains form, when the plants are mature.

Someone who would sow this type of pernicious plant on top of a good field of wheat would have to be pretty darned evil. In Jesus’ time, a field of wheat was more than merely a cash crop. It was a year’s worth of bread – a family’s basic sustenance. A lost crop would be a disaster – poverty and starvation. Whoever did this had to have a level of malice you don’t run into every day. In fact the word for enemy here – *ekthros* – implies a personal hatred. Somebody like, say, Satan.

I have some trouble with Satan. Well, I would hope that we would ALL have some trouble with Satan, but I mean specifically the IDEA of Satan. And I don’t quite know why. Satan or the devil or the evil one, as a being, is all over the Bible, from Lucifer’s fall in Isaiah, to Satan tempting Jesus in the wilderness, to his defeat in Revelation. So why do I have trouble wrapping my mind around it?

I think part of it is me, and part of it is our culture. The me part comes from my mom. My mom was a kind of simple soul and she truly didn’t understand meanness. She wasn’t stupid, and she saw plenty of evil in action, but I don’t think she understood it in her heart. I like to think that I inherited that from her. If Michael has heard me say, “I don’t understand how people can be so mean,” once, he’s heard it a thousand times.

And our culture doesn’t help. Everything must be empirically proven and scientifically valid for it to be real, even Satan. This is pretty funny, coming from me. I’m in the faith business, after all. And I have no trouble believing in God, or in angels, or in miracles, or in Jesus being resurrected from the dead.

But somehow, in the same way that many people want miracles to have a rational, physical explanation, we also want evil to be explainable and quantifiable. Maybe it’s caused by mental illness, or stress, or greed, or something else that we can understand.

But what if it’s not? What if there is a being out there whose sole purpose in life is to be evil and cause other people to do and be evil. What if Satan is real and hates all of God’s creation, and is hell bent on destroying it by any means possible? It’s a scary thought, but one we have to look at straight on, according to Jesus and this parable.

This begs another, underlying question here – the one that we’re really afraid to ask. That question is why does God allow evil to exist when it causes so much suffering? Why doesn’t God just take Satan down and be done with it?

This is a question that has been plaguing mankind forever. As a field of study, it even has its own name – theodicy – which means God and justice. It’s an effort to figure out just this question of God and evil, and most of the theories come down to God is God and we have free will. There, I’ve just whittled down thousands of years of philosophical study into a bumper sticker!

The short answer is, “we don’t know.” And that hurts sometimes. It hurts a lot! Why do tornadoes tear apart whole towns? Why do people bomb innocent children or shoot down airliners? Why does cancer hit one person and leave another alone? Why do people abuse their spouses or children? Why do people reject whole groups of other people in the name of the God of love? Why, why, why?

I think from our perspective, there is no good answer. But there is AN answer, and it’s found partly in this passage from Matthew.

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. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Later, when asked what it all means by his disciples, Jesus says,

“The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”

The farmer in this story, whom Jesus identifies as the Son of Man, did not want the bad weeds to be sown in his wheat field. He didn’t plan it. It wasn’t his will. Just like, I believe, it’s not God’s will that bad things happen. God doesn’t put disaster or evil in our path to test us or to somehow form our faith.

But the bad seeds WERE sown. The evil DID happen. And this evil was particularly nasty because it would be impossible to root out the bad seedlings without also destroying the good seedlings. So we might infer from that that God won’t destroy all of the evil on the earth right now, because we would also be destroyed in the process.

But just like the farmer is watching the field, God is watching us and our world. And when the time is right, when the harvest is ready, the evil will be separated from the good, with no harm to us, and will be destroyed.

God knows there is evil and he knows suffering first hand. We know this because Jesus became one of us and lived and suffered and died with us. God is not the distant, cold, observer of evil and misery. Our pain is his pain and our suffering touches him. But in his time, all will be made right. That’s our hope because that is God’s promise to us. Evil is NOT part of God’s plan. But God does have a plan for evil.

In the meantime, we must fight evil ourselves, wherever we find it. We must take a stand against injustice and prejudice and immorality, but always staying in touch with God through prayer to make sure we aren’t doing more harm than good. And then we trust that God is in control and that ultimately we will shine like the sun in his kingdom – the kingdom where evil no longer has a place to thrive.

Amen.