

To be honest, I cringe a little every time I read one of Jesus' agricultural parables, because whatever the opposite of a green thumb is—that's what I have. It's a shame, really, as the little bit of space I have for landscaping at my house seems very fertile. Of course, it's as good at producing weeds and poison ivy as it is at producing desirable plants. There comes a day every summer, and that day came about a week and a half ago, when I give up on fighting the weeds and decide to deal with them when everything dies off in the fall. You'd think I'd be proactive before they get out of hand, but because this is not my area of expertise, in the springtime, when it all turns green and flowers, I have a hard time even telling what is a weed and what is supposed to be there. And just like in the parable, there have been times when I've gotten so zealous in my weeding, I have managed to pull up the good plants along with the bad. So all the weeds in between my roses and day lilies...let's just say I'm trying to do what Jesus taught.

One of the themes we see again and again in Matthew's gospel is concern about who belongs and who does not, who is in and who is out. We surmise that Matthew wrote for a community where the majority of believers were, like Jesus, Jewish; but as more and more gentiles came to follow Christ without adopting Jewish culture, the fledgling church had to figure out how to include "outsiders" in their fellowship. So Matthew writes about the magi traveling from a foreign land and foreign religion to meet the baby Jesus, and the holy family fleeing to Egypt as refugees, and Roman centurions seeking and receiving Jesus' help, and sheep and goats, and weeds and wheat.

In this parable, which Jesus explains privately to the disciples, the Son of Man sows good seed—the children of the kingdom, while the devil sows weeds—the children of evil. The slaves think it would be good service to their master to tear up all the weeds, but they are told to leave that to the reapers at the harvest, lest they damage the wheat, too. Jesus assures them that at the end of time, the angels will remove all the causes of sin and evildoers from the kingdom. Punishment or purification, depending on how you look at it, awaits the evil weeds, while the righteous wheat is gathered into the kingdom.

We sort of have to play a couple parts in order for this story to teach us something about how God expects us to live and serve in the kingdom. We would like to think of ourselves as the wheat—the children of the kingdom. Yet human nature also draws us to the role of the slaves who, possibly out of a genuine desire to be good, helpful, and faithful, want to serve the master by ripping up weeds. But the master knows that, much like me when I survey the mess in my front yard, the slaves may be unable to tell the difference between what is good and what is bad and might end up damaging what the master is trying to grow. Although slavery in the

ancient near east was not the same as the slavery we Americans think of in the antebellum South, notice that these slaves, who probably already had plenty of work to keep them busy, eagerly volunteer for this job. Sort of sounds like Jesus telling his disciples to love their neighbors and forgive their enemies, then the whole of Christian history being marred by so-called holy wars, inquisitions, schisms, and excommunications. Jesus told us what our job is, and rooting out people who we've decided are evil isn't it.

That is not to say that everything is relative and that evil doesn't exist; this parable acknowledges the existence of evil and people acting under evil influences. We can't look at the world around us and pretend that there isn't real evil being done in it. And we can get impatient for justice—*groaning inwardly while we wait*, as Paul writes to the Romans; I know that sometimes the thing I find even more frustrating than wrongdoing is when the one doing wrong seems to escape any kind of accountability. Jesus promises us that justice and accountability—but reminds us that it is God, not us, who will make sure that happens. We may *think* we're doing what God would want us to do by figuring out who is evil and getting rid of them, but Jesus tells us that is *not* what we are called us to do. Maybe because we're so bad at it; humanity proves again and again that in spite of scripture telling us what good fruit looks like—love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, self-control—we still can't reliably tell what is good and what is evil.

I have a t-shirt that says *1692—They missed one*: a reference to the Salem witch trials. Someone asked me why I'd want to joke about witchcraft, and I said, *Think about it: They weren't burning witches, they were burning women*. How did we come to fear the ones being burned at the stake and not the ones doing the burning? We would hope after that disastrous chapter in our nation's history, and after a few more centuries of enlightenment, that we would have learned our lesson. But in 1953, when Arthur Miller wrote *The Crucible* about the Salem witch trials, what he was really writing was an allegory about McCarthyism, people still taking it upon themselves to root out evil, not caring if innocent people became collateral damage. When we appoint ourselves judge, jury, and executioner, we're bound to hurt good people, *and* we're more than likely going to end up aiding and abetting, if not committing, the very evil that Jesus assures us has no place in the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, he's inviting us to put down the responsibilities that we all too eagerly assign to ourselves, but that we were never meant to carry. Isn't it exhausting to look at the world as if it were full of enemies to conquer, when all Jesus asked us to do was find neighbors to love? That's plenty to keep us busy; we can trust God to take care of the rest.