

Years ago, a friend of mine, speaking about his golf game, said the key to success was to care enough about the game not to care. I think there's something true about that with parables as well; that is, the best way to preach parables is to be serious enough about them to not take them too seriously. And, in particular, to be cautious about interpreting them too strictly or literally.

Parables, according to C. H. Dodd, one of the great NT scholars of the last century, are "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application as to tease it into active thought" (Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 1935:16). Parables, that is, are suggestive, evocative, sometimes disconcerting, offering *glimpses* into the kingdom of God, but not explanations or definitions. Indeed, as Robert Farrer Capon puts it, "With Jesus, the device of parabolic utterance is used not to explain things to people's satisfaction but to call attention to the unsatisfactoriness of all their previous explanations and understandings" (Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 6). Which is, of course, precisely what made them hard for Jesus' earliest followers to hold onto without asking for, or adding, explanations. We like explanations far more than being teased into active thought or having our unsatisfactory explanations called into question!

The story of the wheat and weeds is, in my opinion, one of the more challenging parables in Matthew's Gospel. But I wonder if part of the reason for that is because we want it to do more than it was intended to do. It is not an explanation of evil, nor is it an invitation to divide the world into "wheat" and "weeds," nor instruction to do nothing until God comes in judgment. It is a story that most likely is trying to help Matthew's community make sense of massive disruptions both external and internal and, perhaps particularly, of why folks in their midst are were "falling away" from the faith. Some interpretive leap from Matthew's time and context to our own is therefore imperative. Three years ago, I suggested [allowing the parable to speak into the very real ambiguity of our lives](#) and invite us to greater confidence in God's absolution that empowers us to live with integrity. This year, it occurs to me that this passage might provide an opportunity to talk about evil. Not to answer satisfactorily, let alone fully, the question of "why evil exists?", but rather to acknowledge simply that it *does* exist, that this world – and for that matter our communities, churches, and households – are not what they could be, and that there is a lot of hurt and frustration that we would like to do something about but don't seem able to.

The experience of the servants – frustrated that things have gone awry, eager to make it right even to the point of risking damage to something important – is not foreign to our people. How many times have we felt like "an enemy has done this"? When the cancer returns, when the job goes away, when the relationship ends, when depression sets in, when addiction robs a loved one (or ourselves) of life, when a congregation is divided, when a loved one's life is cut short, when war forces thousands to flee as refugees, when the world turns its back on people in need. At these times, the sense that this world is not what God intended can be almost unbearable, and you don't have to believe in a red-suited devil with a pointy tail and pitchfork to name the reality of sin, brokenness, and evil in the world. Again, the temptation to use this parable to explain evil probably won't turn out that well. But can we at least acknowledge it?

And, having acknowledged it, can we then also acknowledge that this is not God's design or desire? I have witnessed time and again how difficult it is for many of us to avoid the temptation to explain evil – quite ironically! – by assigning it to some greater plan God supposedly has for us. "Don't worry, it's part of God's plan," someone says to another after tragedy. Or, "Don't worry, God never gives us more than we can handle." Or, "God's purpose for this will reveal itself in time." All of these words of supposed comfort end up assigning God responsibility for tragedy and brokenness, in a way not all that different than the insurance policies that once protected us against, "fire, hail, tornado, hurricane, and *other acts of God*."

I think one of the things this parable suggests is that God does not will evil for us, not in any way, shape, or form. That our tragedies are not part of God's plan. That God never, ever wants us to suffer. Rather, according to Paul, "God works for the good in all things" for those God loves. The chief example of this for me is the cross itself. Again, many assume the cross was always a part of God's plan, but I don't think so. Rather, I think the cross offers supreme testimony that evil happens and yet it is not strong enough to defeat God's love, that God is committed to staying with us through even the most difficult of circumstances, and that God can and will work through – but does not wish or will – even the worst of situations.

"An enemy has done this." Not God, but the enemy. That is the first thing it may help to tell our folks. Second, in the end, it will be up to God to sort out the wheat and the tares, good and evil. There is an acknowledgement here, I believe, that the evil we deplore runs through each community, each household, each person. We can – and are encouraged – to work against evil and for the good in ourselves, in our communities, and in the world. But ultimately, it is and will be up to God. And this has two important implications: A) The final judgment of others is left in God's hands. We rarely know what motivates other people to speak and act as they do, and while we may oppose their words and actions, we cannot remove them from the power of God's redemptive love by taking judgment into our own hands. B) Trusting that God will redeem the world frees us to take responsibility for caring our little corner of it. You don't have to defeat evil and death – that's God's job. But you can care for your neighbor, speak out against injustice, support those in need...right now, right where you find yourself.

Waiting for God's final acts of judgment and redemption is hard. There is so much pain. But, in the meantime, and confident of God's judgment, mercy, and redemption, you can nurture the wheat and strengthen what is good all around you. For while the enemy is powerful, our Lord is more powerful still.