

Judgment in the meantime

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Jesus put before the crowd another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' 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.'" Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 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. Let anyone with ears listen!" - Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

This past week, after a hiatus of 17 years, our federal government resumed capital punishments. Three men – all of whom had been tried for and found guilty of heinous felonies – were executed by lethal injection at the federal prison complex in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Setting aside for the moment any of our personal convictions, one way or the other, about capital punishment, I wonder how many of us can imagine having our own most grievous sins so thoroughly scrutinized, debated and publicized, and so ultimately punished. I wonder about being a juror or judge in a trial that might result in the death of another human being. I wonder about Dustin Honken, the last of the three men executed this past week. His last words were, "*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for me.*"

Right and wrong. Good and evil. Reward and punishment. These are some of the most basic features of our human condition. Jesus wades right into these matters, giving us a ground-level view, with the parable in today's appointed text from Matthew.

A wheat field has been sown, and all goes well until one night, when evil is also sown there, in the same field. It's a picture of our world, isn't it? Jesus himself says so. Good and evil co-exist. What are we to do about it?

The laborers in the parable are eager to remove the resulting weeds, and to do so *right now*. But the landowner requires restraint: *Wait for the harvest, lest you do more harm than good*. To be specific, he explains, "*in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.*"

In the interpretive section that follows, Jesus likens the weeds to '*all causes of sin and all evildoers.*' They'll have their day in the Court of God, he says, and it won't go well at all. They'll all be thrown "*into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

If the parable is addressing the problem of evil in the world and how we are to respond to it, the standard and plausible takeaway message seems to be that we are to refrain from the punishment of evil that ultimately belongs to God. *“Don’t become too invested in whether or not evil people get what they deserve – they will get theirs in the end; God will see to that. And it won’t be pretty.”*

What is implicit in this prevailing view of the parable is the assumption that we already know with certainty that *we* are the good people, God’s chosen, and that we know God’s righteous will, and that we know who *they* are – *the weeds, the evil ones*. This understanding of the parable doesn’t question our judgment, our condemnations of others; it only suggests that we should leave the punishing to God at a later date.

But let’s go a little deeper into the weeds of this parable, literally. Eight times in this text, Jesus uses the word *zizania*. His hearers would have frozen. From the moment it sprouted until harvest, *zizania* was nearly indistinguishable from wheat. Uproot and remove what you think is *zizania* and you might instead be destroying your wheat.

Maybe the message of the parable is not, after all, about leaving punishment to God for what we know to be wrong. Maybe Jesus tells the parable so that we will examine how flawed and tragically consequential our human judgments and punishments can be in the first place. Jesus may be saying, *You really have no idea who’s who in God’s eyes. The final sorting of good and evil won’t even take place in this world. Your human attempts to judge and punish are likely to be as flawed, and maybe even as destructive, as those who would prematurely separate the zizania from the wheat.”*

This is not the only place that we hear this cautionary message in the Gospel of Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advises, *“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged ...”* (Matthew 7:1) and, *“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”* (Matthew 7:3-5). And toward the end of the gospel of Matthew we are invited to sit with the well-intentioned jurors to whom Jesus was first brought during his Passion. All of them were religious leaders, thought to be supremely wise. When asked about the fate of Jesus, they shouted out with one united voice, *“He deserves to die!”* (Matthew 26:66)

Over the past 40 years in our own justice system, 117 persons in our nation who were sentenced to death were later found to be innocent. For 31 of those, it was too late. With regard to our own judgments and punishments of others, maybe some of you know, as I do, the experience of righteously administering the equivalent of a lethal injection only to discover later that we were dead wrong. It turned out we’d done more evil than good.

If we know the mortification of that experience, and if we are prepared to learn from it, Jesus has a parable that he would like to sow in us. *Amen.*