**SERMON Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 (Narrative Lectionary, NL126)**

This morning’s parable, unlike many, comes prepackaged with an explanation. In the world there are two types of people (and things) good and bad. The good will go to heaven and the bad will go to hell. It’s a world without ambiguity, without nuance. Goodness is easily discernible from the bad, the roles are assigned, and the consequences are grave.

For a long time that is exactly how I viewed the world as well. I was my job, as a Christian, to be good and show everyone else how to be good as well. This goal, of course, though noble on the surface easily becomes an incubator for criticism and perfectionism. Shaping a value system that, when turned inward becomes constant self-debasing inner critic. And when turned outward, sees a world where *no* one and *no* thing can do anything right.

But folks, I got to confess: When I look out at the world, as I travel from church to the grocery store, from home to the gym, to restaurants and gas stations (even along I-264) the world isn’t so easily split into two neat and exclusive categories. People, including me, are a mixed bag. No matter how hard I try to do everything right, to nurture good attitudes and right-judgement, no matter how desperate I am to be a force for goodness, for peace, for justice, for love…to be counted among the good. The truth is, that I’m full of *both* good and bad, and everything in-between. And you are just as complicated too.

So, I no longer subscribe to this so-called ‘biblical worldview.’ Or at least the view that the world can be carved up and categorized so easily. I have come to believe that such an interpretation isn’t *in fact* biblical, or at least the only assessment of the world found in scripture. And so, I’m taking issue with the explanation we find in Matthew of what The Parable of the Weeds means. There is *so much* more in the Parable itself that the explanation doesn’t even touch on, that can hold great meaning and relevance for us today. Ok, I know we’re already well into this thing, but this might be as good a time as any to pray:

O Great Storyteller, how often we have misunderstood your message. How often have we read your parables, stories from your imagination without doing the work of reflection. And without that real work of discernment, we misrepresent and mis-apply their lessons to our lives and our world.

May you open our eyes and our ears so that today we hear your story of the weeds a-fresh. Infuse new meaning and new relevance into this ancient text, so that we might become more like you, embodying the values of love, compassion, and humility. Amen.

NOTE ABOUT TRANSLATION

First things first, a note about the biblical translation that I chose. I selected The Inclusive Version of the Bible to read today. Partly must I wanted to let you know that there *is* such a thing, but mostly because it translates “slaves,” or “servants” with “the ones enslaved by the householder.” This interpretive choice is an anti-racist choice, which I discerned was particularly important as we enter Black History Month. The choice to use the term “enslaved people” instead of “slaves,” is an important reminder that there was “an enslaver,” and that a human’s identity ought not be defined by the tyranny and trauma they experienced under that enslaver.

However, translating scripture is an art not a science, and in selecting this translation we encounter the phrase “dominion of heaven” which I am not a fan of. Such a rendering of the ‘kingdom of God’ reinforces the popular thought that the kingdom of God, is heaven. But it is highly unlikely that in the days of Jesus, anyone thought this. The people of 1st-century Palestine had daily, negative experiences with the “kingdom of Rome,” and they longed for the prophesied Messiah to come and overthrow Rome so that the “kingdom of God could take over.” The kingdom of God, therefore, was understood as the rule and reign of God on earth, here and now as a replacement for the kingdoms of mortals. The prevailing understanding of the “kingdom of God” would have had very little, if anything to do with heaven.

THE TWIST

Now, anytime we read a text in scripture, particularly something like a parable and its explanation, I have found that it’s always helpful to observe what is absent. I said earlier, rather boldly that I took issue with the explanation of our parable. And it is because of what is *not* there.

May biblical commentators state that the most compelling part of any parable is “the twist.” They tell episodes of typical scenarios from everyday life, with characters recognizable to the ordinary people. *And* *then* in middle of an otherwise ordinary scene they will have a “surprise point,” a “twisted detail,” that runs counter to everyday experience and serves as the pivot, the central point of importance for interpretation.

THE TWIST

The surprising element in this parable is that the householder *allows* the weeds to grow alongside the wheat. To coexist until the harvest. The central thrust of this parable is the contrast between the householder who waits and his enslaved workers who are eager to root out the weeds at first sight.

But that is not the only surprising element. In the parable, besides the “someone who sowed good seed” (13:24) and “an enemy” who sowed bad seed (13:25) the central characters in this story are the householder and those he enslaved to work in the fields. However, our gospel writer *does not* attribute roles or meaning to those characters in his explanation.

Look again at verses 37, 38 and 39. The “the one who sows the good seed” is Jesus (v.37); “the field is the world, and the good seed are the children” of the Kin-dom of God” (v.38a). “[T]he weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy…is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels” (v.38b-39). BUT the householder and the enslaved people are not assigned a role.

THE INTERPRETATION

So, focusing on these characters who DO NOT have their roles assigned, here’s what I think:

What if, the real meaning of this story wasn’t immediately captured by Matthew’s explanation (attributed to Jesus though it was)?

What if, the householder represents all those with power, property, and privilege?

What if, the householder’s judgment regarding the weeds was a bad one? A decision, not based on an intimate, expert knowledge of the field, its crops, and the harvest, but on a *false* sense of expertise, a self-appointed authority on agriculture.

What if this parable is revealing to us the identity of those who CAN in fact see clearly the good from the bad, the right from the wrong, the just from the unjust?

You see, it is worth mentioning that those whom the householder has enslaved to tend to the field, DO in fact seem to know how to tell the weeds from the wheat. And, *in* their offer to pluck out the weeds, there is no hesitation on their part. No fear of disrupting the good roots of the wheat. Instead, it is the householder, removed from the labor done in the fields by wealth and privilege, who opts to leave well alone. It is the householder that doesn’t seem to trust the judgment of his workforce.

THE APPLICATION

Folks, may I suggest that the character of the householder and the characters referred to as “the ones enslaved by the householder” provide for us a fascinating lens through which to re-interpret this parable for today, on this first Sunday in Black History Month.

A month created to highlight the contributions by Black Americans to society and culture. A month to amplify the multifaceted narrative that in our time, is being systematically cut out of classrooms, rejected in communities, and neglected in crucial conversations across the nations. You see, as Howard Thurman (the African American theologian, mystic, and civil rights leader) points out (in the late 40s), “Jesus’ life and teachings have seldom been interpreted in a way that gives hope and relief to those whose ‘backs are against the wall’.” Biblical scholarship until the last 3 or 4 decades was primarily carried out by those who have more in common with the householder and the farmhand.

And we humans (particularly those of us that do not have our backs against the wall, who hold degrees of privilege in this world) have the destructive tendency to claim the good for ourselves and project the bad onto others. Creating, what the scriptures poetically describes as, “the weeping and gnashing of teeth” *on each other* through words and deeds (13:42; Ps 37 & 112). The field of our shared world bears the marks of hatred and divisiveness alongside beacons of hope and creative potential for justice-love, if we only have eyes to see and ears to hear. But so often, the folks who can see the world clearly, for what it really is, are not those sitting in privilege, but those who have been pushed to the very margins of society.

The folks who can see the need for more affordable housing are not the one’s able to secure a 30-year mortgage but the ones suffering the bitter cold on the street, huddled under overpasses and along the hedges and fences on the highway.

The folks who can see the importance of mental health services are not the ones who have never experienced depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts, it is the ones who do. The ones who struggle to get affordable medication and therapeutical services.

The folks who see the need for reproductive rights are not the ones whose lives are upended by pregnancy-as-a-result of sexual assault, or pregnancy loss. It is the ones who have to carry the stillborn baby to term, or are refused gender-affirming surgery or do not have the finances to raise a child.

The folks who protest and take to the street to shout for police reform are typically not the one who can jump in their vehicles without a care in the world even when blue lights appear behind them, it is instead the ones who live with the daily threat of violence at the hands of law enforcement and a broken criminal justice system. The ones who live in fear no matter where they are, or what they’re doing. Whether they are in their vehicles, in their beds, in a store or attending a protest.

Friends, this parable has in it, *wisdom* for today. I will never experience this complicated, broken world like those who have had “their backs against the wall.” I am the householder in this story. I am more likely to say, “why don’t we all get along,” “why don’t we wait for someone else to weed out the bad,” “it doesn’t like it’s causing much harm anyway.” I am more likely to assume that my opinion, my decision is the good one, the right course of action. I am more likely to trust my own instincts and sense of judgment over another’s, particularly if they are different from me. I am more likely to claim knowledge I don’t have, wisdom I haven’t earned, than humble myself to listen and learn from another.

May God have mercy on me. May I learn to sit at the feet of those who have experienced economic hardship, racism, homophobia, and transphobia. May I learn to sit at the feet of those who are homeless, who are sick and lonely. May I learn to listen to the experiences of those who have daily mental health struggles, who have had experiences in the criminal justice system, or who have fled their homeland because of fear of violence and persecution. May I become less like the householder who brushes off the suggestion of those he had enslaved. May I trust that others are experts of their own experiences. May God have mercy on me. Amen.

[PAUSE]

As we enter the silence this week, may I invite you to reflect on the voices you listen and pay attention to, that you allow to shape your values and opinions. Whose voices are elevated in importance? And whose are often forgotten or discredited? In humility let us re-tune our ears to those whose ‘backs are against the wall.’ May we take a learning posture from those who suffer and can often see the world much more clearly than we can.

Let us enter our time of reflection.