

I think it's safe to say, we live in a time when global anxiety is running high. Few of us are very cheerful or optimistic about the future. Whether the topic is international relations, the nation, the Church, the economy, or the environment, the consensus is that things are getting worse, not better. The whole creation is groaning, as St. Paul says in this morning's Epistle, and the weeds seem to be crowding out the wheat.

Those of us who believe in God have a difficult time explaining to ourselves, or anyone else for that matter, why the state of affairs is as it is. All of us wrestle with a world that is messier than we would like it to be. The details have changed since our scriptures were written, but the dilemma remains the same: what should we do about this mess? What *can* we do, and why *is* it this way in the first place? If God is really in charge, then why isn't the world a beautiful sea of waving grain? Why does evil have to exist side by side with good?

According to Jesus, not even the kingdom of heaven is free of evil. It may have started out that way, but in the parable he tells this morning, he describes how, sometime during the night, while everyone was sleeping, an enemy sneaked in and sowed weeds among the wheat – darnel, to be exact, a nasty wheat look-alike with poisonous seeds and roots like nylon cord. If it is not separated from the wheat at some point or another, those seeds can get ground into the flour and make a loaf of bread that will give you a stomachache to remember.

Some biblical commentaries dismiss the “enemy sower” business as Matthew's over-zealous attempt to deal with the issue of good and evil in a rather simplistic way. It is, after all, a story told only in Matthew, so we have no parallels in Luke or Mark to compare it to. The commentators note that weeds do not require an agrarian terrorist to plant them – they grow all by themselves. But however the weeds get there, the fact remains that most of us have them – not only in our yards, but also in our lives: thorny people who were not part of the plan, life situations that are not welcome, or problems in life that are just plain irritating, like poison ivy.

“Do you want us to go and gather them?” the slaves ask their master. That is the common sense solution, isn't it? Pull them up, cast them out, and cleanse the field. We have witnessed a lot of that kind of cleansing in our lifetime – in World War II Germany, Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, the Middle East, the Sudan, Rwanda, Iraq, and more recently, the Ukraine. Always political, and most of the time religious.

Or, how about our own beloved Church? Marginalize or discriminate against people that some *think* are weeds. And before you draw conclusions that “they” (whoever “they” are) are weeds, and “we’re” wheat, be reminded: Wherever people, groups, or nations are busy trying to purify the field by hostile means, they are doing what the slaves wanted to do; only they are doing it without permission, because the Master said no.

“No,” he said, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Collect the weeds first and bind them into bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

This is a stunning statement, first of all because it strikes us as bad gardening, but more so because it seems to advocate passivity in the face of evil. It also seems to suggest that we can possibly do harm when we *think* we are doing good.

Well, I can think of at least three reasons Jesus gives for why he says “no” to those who want to neaten up the wheat field.

The first is that ***they are not skilled enough to separate the good from the bad.*** They cannot always tell the difference, for one thing. They exterminate something that *looks* like a weed, but when they bend over to pick up the limp stalk that they’ve yanked up, grains of wheat fall out.

In one of the first crusades, knights from Western Europe blew through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land and killed everyone in sight. It was not until later, when they turned over the bodies, that they found crosses around most of their victims’ necks. It never occurred to them that Christians came in brown as well as white. To our shame, the Church has throughout history not heeded Jesus’ instructions to not uproot what “it thinks” are weeds.

A second reason to let the weeds grow is that ***they may turn out to be useful in the end.*** In first-century Palestine, for instance, lumber and coal were hard to come by. The best bet for heating and cooking fuel was, you guessed it, dried weeds. By letting the weeds and the wheat grow together, farmers had almost everything they needed to make bread: the wheat for the flour and the weeds for the fire. The only other thing they needed was a little patience, a little tolerance of the temporary mess, until everything was put to good use at the harvest.

The third reason I think Jesus says no to yanking up the weeds is that ***the wheat runs the risk of turning into weeds themselves.*** It is one of the trickiest things weeds do: to get the wheat so riled up and defensive that the wheat starts *acting* like weeds –

full of prickles, full of poison – good guys who turn into bad guys, trying to put the bad guys out of business.

Jesus has warned us about this another time, as told by Matthew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (*Matthew 5:38-39, 44-45*)

God allows a mixed field, in other words, and whether we like it, approve of it, understand it or not, God asks us to tolerate a mixed field, too – both in the Church and in the world. Don’t get the wrong idea – this is not even remotely a call to passivity. It is, instead, a call to strenuous activity (as any of you, who have tried to love your enemies, or even irritating fellow Christians, already know).

Our task, in a mixed field, is not to give ourselves over to the power of evil by devoting all of our energy to the destroying the weeds, but rather to set our hearts and minds on the reconciliation of the world to God, through the practice of what one commentator calls “unshielded love.” That, my friends, is at the heart of Jesus’ gospel. If we give ourselves to *that* mission, God will take care of the rest – the harvest, the reapers, and the fire – all of it.

I’ll close with a word or two about Pope John XXIII, one of God’s great saints who ended his prayers each night by saying to himself, “But who governs the Church? You or the Holy Spirit? Very well, then, go to sleep, Angelo.”

What John XXIII taught us is the only way any of us can sleep is by staying true to our roots and to the One who planted us, believing Christ when he tells us that the harvest is *his*, even though we know it’s not easy being wheat in a world full of weeds.

To quote one of his favorite sayings: “...The best solution to evil in our world is to forgive the weeds and go about the business of being wheat, bearing fruit [for the Kingdom of God], and listening to the voice of God. Then, [we can]...await with trust and patience the ultimate vindication in the end – [for] just like resurrection follows crucifixion – God wins.”