

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

This week our Gospel reading has us back in the garden for more parable goodness.

The thing I love about parables is that they are just so roomy – holding so many possible ways of understanding God in such little stories. The Gospel writers often add explanations, showing how they hoped their community would understand them, but they are never that simple.

Preacher and writer Barbara Brown Taylor offers this view: “Parables are not stories that answer the questions we have directly and clearly; instead, they deliver their meaning in images that talk more to our hearts than to our heads.”

This is good to hear because our parable this week can be hard to wrap our heads around.

It’s full of the kingdom of heaven, the devil, and the eschatological sorting of the good and the bad at the end of times. It’s one of those weeping and gnashing of teeth passages that can be hard to reconcile with an all loving God. Not exactly the stuff of hope.

We are told the kingdom of heaven is like when the enemy sows weeds among the good wheat. The evil is mixed in with the good. By this account I think it’s safe to say we

are living in the kingdom of heaven now. We live in times, just like Matthew's community, when there is evil all around. Why? And what are we to do?

Unfortunately, this parable doesn't address the question of WHY the enemy came and sowed the weeds, or WHY the evil exists. Instead it focuses on God's, and the church's, response.

When the workers of the household ask the owner whether they should go and pull the weeds from among the wheat the owner says no – let both of them grow together until the harvest.

What an astonishing answer. Let the weeds grow? Don't pull them? Let them soak up the water and nutrients and sunshine alongside the wheat, possibly choking it out? What kind of gardener does that? Is there some wisdom in there that isn't readily apparent?

It would have been in Jesus' day – though it can get lost in translation for us. The word we have translated as weed can also be translated tare. Tare refers to the bearded darnel plant, common throughout the Near East. In its immature stages it looks almost identical to wheat. Only when the tare puts on its seed can you distinguish it from the wheat.

That little botanical fact makes all the difference in this story. It, in fact, makes the eschatological sorting – the weeping and gnashing and furnace of fire – easier to deal with in some ways. Because it points us back to something in the passage we are likely to pass over.

We're not the ones called to do the sorting, **God** is. Because only God can really know the difference between the wheat and the tares.

We don't know the plants well enough to know which ones need to be pulled and which ones don't. Only God does. As the Gospel says: *for in gathering the weeds you would also uproot the wheat along with them.*

In our exuberance to rid the world of what we perceive as evil, how often have we hurt the good as well? In our flawed human attempts to deliver what we claim to be justice, how many innocents have been caught up in our judgments?

So often we see what we want to see – instead of what God sees.

There is a story told about 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 after the battle, when they turned the bodies over, that they found crosses around most of their victim's necks. It never occurred to them that Christians could look different than themselves.

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Whether we are comfortable with the idea of it or not, our Christian heritage tells us there will be a time for God's judgement.

In Bishop and scholar NT Wright's book, *Surprised by Hope*, he writes that this judgement is good news because the One through whom God's justice will finally sweep through the world is not a hard-hearted, arrogant, or vengeful tyrant, but rather the Man of Sorrows, who was acquainted with grief; the Jesus who loved sinners and died for them, the Messiah who took the world's judgment upon himself on the cross. Of course, this also means that he is uniquely placed to judge the systems and rulers that have carved up the world between them....

This **is** good news. Though the kingdom is rife with evil now, there is a time coming when all death and decay, all injustice and tears, will be wiped away.

Knowing this is not an excuse for lack of action in this life. Just because we are not called to judge doesn't mean we are to turn a blind eye to the evil of the world. This parable points to the church's response to it.

Just as the difference between the tare and the wheat aren't known until they put on their seed, we too will be known by our fruits. Our response, our mission, is not to sort the weeds; it is to bear good fruit. It is by our fruit that we will be known.

That may not sound like much in the face of all the evil in the world, but is it what we are called to do.

Again, listen to Barbara Brown Taylor: "What God seems to know is that the best and only real solution to evil is to bear good fruit. Our job, in a mixed field, is not to give ourselves to the enemy by devoting all our energy to the destruction of the weeds, but to mind our own business, so to speak – our business being the reconciliation of the world through the practice of unshielded love. If we give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest...."

Wow. Could it be that this parable about sorting out the good from the bad is not so different than the extravagant gardener who sowed seed everywhere last week? Could they both be pointing us in the direction of simply trusting God – trusting in God's abundance, in God's wisdom, and in God's time?

This parable reminds us that what we do now does matter. It is by our fruits that we will be known. We and the systems in which we live **will** be judged, but it is by trusting in

God's abundance, wisdom and time – the fruits of God's love and grace – that we will truly know God in the end. This is the stuff of hope, thanks be to God. Amen.