

WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

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Today's lesson is the second of three parables Jesus tells about seeds in Matthew 13. Next week you get more about the mustard seed we heard in Godly Play today.

Last week, it was all about the soil.

The farmer who throws seeds on a path where they become birdseed. On rocky ground that cannot sustain their roots. Among thorns where they get choked out. And on some good soil where the seeds bear fruit.

Pastor Anita said last week:

The farmer is taking the extravagant risk to spread the seed everywhere, hoping something will grow. Maybe the result won't be what she was expecting, but planting seeds is an act of faith. It is an act of trust ... At some point, the generosity of God becomes clear as growth occurs.

And sometimes, for that growth to happen, she says, we need to make some "holy compost." Sometimes we have to let things die, "to be grieved and [then] allowed to decompose" so that something new can grow – so that "YOU," she says, "can grow, despite the situations of your life that have taught you [that] you can't change."

I'm still working on that holy composting thing. And learning to trust change. And letting go of trying to control outcomes and believing that the generosity of God will become clear in the change that growth demands.

So, just when we start working on the first parable about seeds in Matthew 13, Jesus throws another one at us. This one has a more sinister twist.

This is Matthew 13.24-30 and then the interpretation in verses 36-43. I'm reading from the *Inclusive Bible*.

Jesus presented another parable to those gathered: "The kin-dom of heaven is like a farmer who sowed good seed in a field. While everyone was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. When the crop began to mature and yield grain, the weeds became evident as well. The farmer's workers came asked, 'Did you not sow good seed in your field? Where are the weeds coming from?'

'The farmer replied, 'I see an enemy's hand in this.'

The farm workers said, 'Do you want us to go out and pull them up?'

'No,' replied the farmer, 'if you pull up the weeds, you might take the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest, then at harvest time I will order the harvesters first to collect the weeds and bundle them up to burn, then to gather the wheat into my barn.'

That's the parable.

Then Jesus left the crowd and went into the house. The disciples also came in and said, "Explain the parable about the weeds in the field."

[Notice that it's the weeds the disciples are worried about.]

Jesus answered, "The farmer sowing the good seed is the Chosen One the field is the world, and the good seed, the citizens of the kin-dom. The weeds are the followers of the Evil One, and the enemy who sowed them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the world, while the harvesters are the angels. Just as weeds are collected and burned, so it will be at the end of the age. The Chosen One will send the angels who will weed out of the kin-dom everything that causes sin and all who act lawlessly. The angels will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. But those who are just will shine like the sun in the kin-dom of their Abba. Let those who have ears to hear, hear this!

I'm guessing this is something you don't necessarily want to hear.

The parable is one thing. But this interpretation brings up all those frightening old images from my religious past that I hope to have left behind in my composting pile. I am just fine, thank you, letting the fiery furnace and the weeping and gnashing of teeth rot away. If anything, let them decompose into something out of which a new way of seeing my life and the world will come.

But here it is.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, when it comes to the gospel of Matthew, one thing is certain: He warms up to any parable that has to do with judgment ... Of all the gospel writers, it is Matthew who most wants a clear-cut creation, in which things are good or bad, in which people are faithful or wicked, blessed or cursed.

In fact, this weeds versus wheat/evil doers versus the just, comes up again in another part of Matthew that we love to quote. At the "end of the age" Matthew 13 is talking about, Matthew 25 says that all the nations of the earth will be gathered at God's throne to be judged. And we love to quote the faithful who say: "When did we see you hungry and thirsty and a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" And the ruler says: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me."

Sound familiar?

But this is Matthew. And there is judgment involved. And just like there are weeds and wheat in Matthew 11, there are sheep and goats in Matthew 25. The sheep are the ones who fed and clothed and welcomed and visited the least of these. The goats are the ones who ignored those

needs. And guess what? The sheep are invited into God's kin-dom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. And the goats? They are sent away to "eternal punishment."

If only life were so clear. If only we could easily distinguish between the sheep and the goats. If only we could have identified those look-alike weeds that threaten the wheat.

But it is not that easy.

The fields of our lives, Taylor says, are full of "mixed plantings" and we have encountered *both* seeds - weeds and wheat - in our neighbors, in the world, and in ourselves.

Bible scholars tell us that there are historical reasons why Matthew was so focused on judgment. That early community of Jesus was threatened from within and without. Some kind of discernment was necessary if the community was to survive and be faithful to its mission.

And maybe these stark images of judgment are there to remind *us* that something is at stake. Recognizing the complications and the confusion and the convoluted nature of human life does not mean that we don't have to make hard decisions sometimes – that we have to hold on to some things on the way to composting others.

I am reminded that one of Dr. King's favorite hymns is a hymn we don't sing very often: "Once to everyone and nation comes a moment to decide." It was written by a privileged white guy who saw the threat of expanding slavery in a trumped up war with Mexico. A judgment had to be made. A side had to be taken. A decision was required. Because life and freedom stood in jeopardy by the forces of slavery and war.

Sometimes I worry that we good liberals don't think anything is really at stake. We love our mysteries. We are enamored of our questions. We celebrate paradox because we can afford to. But for some folks, life is pretty clear-cut. Life or death. Food or hunger. Home or the streets. Welcome or exclusion. Freedom or prison.

The "White Fragility" study is convincing me that white privilege is lurking in all those easy affirmations we make about how we are all just the same, anyway.

All lives matter only if Black lives matter. All lives matter only when Brown lives matter. All lives matter only when Indigenous lives and Asian lives matter. Something is at stake, beloved ones. A judgment has to be made. A side taken. A decision is required.

Now if so much is at stake, it is shocking to me that this parable makes clear that weeds show up not because of some natural disaster. They are the intentional act of an enemy *while everyone was sleeping*.

Is the moral of the story: Ok, see what happens when you are sleeping? Stay awake. Don't fall asleep at the wheel. Be on constant guard.

And, in fact, with so much at stake, it is sometimes *hard* to fall asleep.

One of the things about this pandemic is that my sleep patterns are all broken up. I have to force myself not to watch any news before bedtime because, if I do, with all that's at stake in the world, I can't sleep.

Things happen while you are sleeping.

In other places, Matthew has a lot to say about being awake. But here, the farmer and the workers have done their good work and now it's time for bed. That is exactly how it should be. There is nothing more to be done.

And it appears that, when the farmer does wake up to discover what that enemy has done, he is in no rush to take any drastic action. The workers want to rush right out and try to sort things out. But the farmer says: "No, in trying to get rid of the weeds, you may end up destroying the wheat; wait for the harvest to figure out what should be kept and what should be compost."

Remember a couple weeks ago that it was in the context of Matthew 11 with all its judgments and judgmentalism, that Jesus said, "Give it a rest: Come unto me all you who labor and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest; take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls."

And now Jesus tells this story about what is at stake and he says: "I'm the farmer in the story and I have sown good seed. And *you* are that seed. And even though, while you were sleeping, an enemy came and made a mess of things, don't rush out to fix it. Don't try to sort it out on your own. Don't lose sleep over it ... planting seeds is an act of faith, as Pastor Anita says. It's an act of trust. At some point [we] humans can't do anything more ... At some point, seeds are in the ground ... At some point, the generosity of God becomes clear in what grows."

The hymn we sang today by Natalie Sleeth was written shortly before her husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Imagine the sleepless nights. Imagine the senses being on high alert. Imagine the tears. At his funeral, Natalie and those who had gathered sang:

*In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed, an apple tree ...
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.*

Given all the things at stake in the world and in our own lives, there is plenty to keep us awake at night. It's true. We can be "sleepless in Seattle." You knew that was coming, right?

But Jesus doesn't tell this story to keep us awake when what we need is rest.

He doesn't want to scare the hell out of us or to frighten us into heaven. I'm trying to compost *that* Jesus in order to grow something new.

Maybe the moral of the story is something as simple as recognizing that the fields of our lives are a "mixed planting."

The seeds have been sown that can grow into food to nurture the world and seeds that can poison it. There is composting that needs to be done. Eventually there will be pruning and weeding. And we won't immediately – or maybe never - get to see the harvest.

But there is a promise too: the One who never slumbers or sleeps is at work to show the world what it looks like to shine like the sun. Maybe it is hard to see right now. But it's there. It is the place our souls call "home."

At the beginning of worship, Martha read for us the words of Jan Richardson. I would add today:

When you are losing sleep.

When what is at stake

keeps you awake at night.

When your weeping

has watered the earth ...

When too much

of what depletes you

and not enough

of what restores

and rests you ...

Let there be

dreaming ...

Let the seeds

soaked by tears

turn to grain

to bread

to feasting.

Let there be

coming home.

And today, beloved ones, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES:

See Pastor Anita's sermon, "A Living World Demands It," from Matthew 13.1-9. It is available on the website: www.seattlefirstbaptist.org. The *Inclusive Bible* was produced by Priests for Equality (A Shedd & Ward Book, 2007). Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Know Press, 2004), pp.31-37. The use of "Once to everyone/man and nation," by Dr. King can be demonstrated by his sermons and speeches. The hymn was written by James Russell Lowell as a poem to protest the war with Mexico in 1846. As a New England Abolitionist, he saw that the was a thinly veiled plan to bring another slave-holding state into the Union. The story of "Hymn of Promise" by Natalie Sleeth can be found on www.umcdiscipleship.org in their "History of Hymns" section. The Jan Richardson poem, "Blessing to Summon Rejoicing," is in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015,) p.45.