

Harvest Home

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: One of the questions that has perplexed Christians for thousands of years is the problem of evil. Where did it come from? If, as the Lord plainly states in the Old Testament reading for this morning, “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God”; and if, as the Scriptures assert elsewhere, the Lord is good and gracious and loving – *and* all powerful; then how do we explain all the evil in the world? How do we explain hate and crime and terrorism and pandemics and human suffering in all its forms? If he’s been in charge the whole time and knows everything and all that, how did things get so messed up? And perhaps more relevant to our immediate situation, since we’re already in this awful mess, why does he let it go on? Why not stop it now? This moment: eliminate sin and all its horrible consequences so that we can all live happily ever after. If God is truly all powerful *and* he loves us so much, why doesn’t he do *that*?

Attempts to answer these questions from a Christian point of view are given the fancy name *Theodicy*, which means the vindication or justification of God. It’s as if God were on trial and was obligated to explain himself to us, his sinful creatures, like we were in a position to judge him. Just for the record, we’re not. We are not his judge; he’s ours, and he always will be. Let’s keep that straight. Just the same, we do find the Lord’s own answer to this line of inquiry in his Holy Scriptures. As a matter of fact, Jesus himself answers the second part of the question (why does God allow evil to continue?) in the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, which we heard as today’s Gospel reading. Surprisingly enough, what Jesus says there is that it’s precisely *because* God loves us that he permits evil to continue. “Do you want us to gather up the weeds?” the servants ask. “No”, the Master says, “lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.” So, we see that it’s for the sake of the wheat that the weeds are not destroyed immediately. We’ll come back to that in a bit because that’s the main thrust of this morning’s message. But I don’t want to leave the first part of the question hanging, so we’ll spend few moments on it and briefly attempt to answer: “From where and how did evil come?”

We can take from the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds the truth that God himself did not cause evil. “An enemy has done this”, says the Master when the servants find the weeds in the wheat. We know that all God created was good. Now, it might be argued, “Yes, but didn’t God also make the enemy?” And the answer is no, not really. Satan wasn’t created as the enemy. He defied God and chose that path for himself. Then he enticed our first parents to follow him on that path. *They* could have chosen not to. But too often, this whole problem is explained merely in terms of free will, or free agency. It’s explained as a failure to pass the test of obedience. And while it’s true that free will *is* a factor; it’s not the main one. The main issue here is love.

You see, God loves people. That’s why he made them. That’s why he created everything in the whole universe – simply to give it all to the people he made because he loves them. He loved them so much he gave them a gift that exceeds all others, and that is the capacity to love as he loves. And God’s love is different than anything you or I have ever experienced coming from within our own sinful hearts. God’s love is totally directed outward. It focuses completely on the objects of its devotion. It never thinks of self. It is totally serving, self-giving, and self-sacrificing. It asks only, “What can I do that is good for you?” and then does it, without thinking about the cost or inconvenience to self. Love denies the self to serve others. And an important feature of love is that it must be voluntary. It has to come from within the heart of the one who loves. If it were coerced or forced in any way, it wouldn’t be love at all – it would be slavery.

Therefore, because God gave humankind the ability to love as he does, he had to also give them the option to choose *not* to love. That's what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was for. Adam and Eve were on the receiving end of everything good God created. Everything was for them to fulfill their needs. That's how God showed them his love. But because they needed a way to show their love to him in return, he had to give them something that they could give back to him. The trouble is that God has no needs. There was nothing they could do for him. So God gave them the tree that they were not supposed to eat from. By leaving it alone they could say "As good as that fruit looks, as tempting as it is, I will leave it alone and deprive myself of it in order to express my love for God." Depriving themselves of the tree's fruit was the way God gave them to express their love for him. It was their act of self-denial. And they needed to do that because they were made in God's loving image. They *had* to have a way to express their love for God – so the Tree of knowledge was actually a very good thing. But by choosing to eat from it, as our first parents did, they chose not to love like God does. They chose instead Satan's kind of love: and that means choosing to love *me* above everyone else – most especially God. Satan used his freedom to choose to try to put himself above God. Satan's love is nothing more than self-love. It's the absolute opposite of godly love – and another name for that is "evil". That's all evil is: not loving like God does and instead loving the self. And once humans started doing it, there was no going back. After the seeds of the weeds were sown into the field, there was no way to go pick them all up again. Thus the wheat and the weeds have been growing up together ever since.

And that brings us back to this morning's parable and to the question, "Why doesn't God put an end to all the evil in the world right now?" That seems reasonable. The answer is given as Jesus explains in the parable that there are two kinds of plants growing in the Owner's field. There is the wheat that the Lord planted. They are the children of God's kingdom – the faithful in Christ who have received his Word and believe it; and there are also the weeds that were planted by Satan. They are the unfaithful whose works are wicked and harmful. And it's important to note that in the parable, Jesus actually names in Greek a specific type of weed: it's a kind of darnel, a wild grass. It happens that in the seed head of the darnel plant grows a certain kind of fungus that produces a deadly toxin. If you failed to separate out the darnel heads from the wheat heads before going to the gristmill to make your flour, you be in for a deadly surprise when suppertime came. The enemy who sowed these weeds was not just trying to hurt the Owner in the pocketbook by causing him to have a diminished crop and lots of extra work – no, the enemy was hoping to kill somebody. That's what evil does.

Now, we think, wouldn't it be better for the faithful (that's us, the wheat) if we could do away with all those other guys? Think about it: how crime rates would drop, how much safer our communities would be. We wouldn't have to worry about people getting kidnapped or mugged or robbed. You could leave your house and car unlocked. On the spiritual side, you wouldn't have to worry about people getting deceived by pagan religions and strange cults because all the false teachers would be gone. Christians would not be persecuted. And there wouldn't be so many temptations around. Television would have nothing but good, wholesome entertainment (that's hard to imagine, isn't it?). Your E-mail in-box wouldn't have all those disgusting come-ons from perverts or scams by crooks. And please don't misunderstand me: the faithful aren't perfect in this life; but wouldn't things be so much better if just we could do away with the toxic weeds of Satan? Or at least, the very worst of them?

Jesus answers that question with an emphatic "No". And to help us understand his answer, you have to know that this darnel weed that Jesus mentions is related to wheat and looks just like it when it sprouts and as it grows. It's not until the heads of both form that anyone able to distinguish a difference. And so by using this specific illustration, Jesus is saying that

you can't tell by looking who is a weed and who is wheat. You don't know who among the unbelievers may come to faith tomorrow – or which of their descendants might come into the family of God. Likewise, you don't know who currently counted among the faithful is really a hypocrite and has no faith at all. So, where – or rather, with *whom* – would you begin to get rid of the weeds?

It's a sad part of the history of our faith that from time to time well meaning but misguided people have set out to do the weeding. Crusades and wars have been fought against infidels. Accused heretics have been tortured and burned. And people have been shunned, robbed, and ridiculed all (amazingly) in the name of Christ. And how it must grieve our Lord who commanded us to pray for our enemies and do them good. The Lord doesn't capture hearts and souls with violence and force; he does it with his Word and with his love expressed through his faithful people. That's our job. And in his own good time he will execute judgment on his enemies. That's his job.

Well, okay then; but if that's true, why doesn't God himself root up the weeds right now? Sure, we can't do it: we can't tell the difference – but surely he knows who is, and who is not, and who will become his children. Why doesn't *he* get rid of the rest of them? That would still be better for the rest of us, wouldn't it?

You might think so, but we should note that in the parable, it's *after* the heads of the plants form that the servants ask the master if he wants them to pull up the weeds. It's after the difference appears. But something else you should know about dandelion is that its root system is deeper and wider than the roots of wheat. In the soil, the roots of both would be all mixed up and grown together. If you tried to pull up the weeds, most of the wheat would come up with it – and then you'd be stuck with a lot of wheat that you couldn't use because it hadn't yet ripened. No, for the wheat to mature properly you have to wait; and to do that, you have to let the weeds grow too.

That's the key to understanding the parable. For God's people to mature properly in their faith, for them to produce their full potential of the fruits of faith, the weeds have to grow too. In a sense, we need them. You see, in Christ, God loves people who hate him. That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. It's about God loving us so much that he gave his Son to die for us, even while we hated him. It's about Christ rising to give us a new life free from the evil of self-love – in order that we can love like God loves once again. For us to learn *that kind* of love, we need people who hate us. Part of our growing in the faith is our interaction with them: how we continue to trust in God despite all the hazards caused by the evil in the world and all that we suffer, how we show Christian love and kindness even to the wicked, and how we continue to witness to the truth of the Gospel even in the face of persecution. As we do, who knows which of them will hear the message and see God's love through us and in the end, turn out to be one of us? Our living in a sinful world full of suffering and sadness provides the resistance we need to struggle against in order to mature properly, so that when the end of the age comes, God will find us ready for harvest.

The reason that we who are faithful must struggle to grow is that we are sinners ourselves. Beneath the surface, our roots are completely tangled up in sin. Our thoughts are wicked, our motives are selfish ... we don't love like God does. But we are growing and maturing. Every time we come into God's presence, be it through his Word or in the Sacraments, there is a sort of miniature harvest that takes place. It's the end of an age, as it were: maybe of a day, of a week, or whatever. When God comes to us, it's judgment day; not for everyone, but for us as individuals.

You see, in each of us there is both the good seed planted by God and also the weeds of Satan. And when God comes to us in our personal devotions or in public worship, we are able to see the weeds clearly. We become very much aware of our sin. And he tells us to bind them up and throw them into the fire – that's exactly what we do when we confess them. Because of Christ's suffering for us, he can take those weeds away leaving nothing but the good that the Spirit worked through us by the Word. And then, planted again with the good seed we've just heard, we go back into the world to keep growing; to keep showing God's love in a hostile world.

And so it goes: seasons of planting, harvest, and separating out the weeds as we continue to grow and bear the fruit in which God delights. It is through this process that God is transforming us to the image of his Son, so that when the end of the final age comes, we will be counted among the righteous who will shine like the sun – or rather like the Son of God – in the kingdom of our Father. May he then give us the grace to concentrate on separating out the weeds within, and to see the weeds without as opportunities to grow in his love, from now until he comes to bring his harvest home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!