

High St Uniting Church Frankston

The evil among us

Matthew 13:24 - 30, 36 - 43



The first thing to understand in this little parable about weeds in the wheat field is that Jesus is not talking about any old weeds. This is not the time to call out adages, like, “A weed is just a plant in the wrong place”, or “A weed is a plant whose virtues are yet to be discovered.” Jesus is talking about a specific plant - bearded darnel or tares - that has no virtues; it is a plant that earns the title of evil. Its seeds cause everything from hallucinations to death if eaten. Its root structure

surrounds and starves neighbouring plants, so if you try to rip it out you damage the good plants. And, until it is full grown, it is almost indistinguishable from wheat. This is not a parable about who is in and who is out, this is a parable about the entanglement of evil in our midst, and the difficulty of getting rid of it. But further thought on the parable, and Jesus’ explanation, leads us to really look at what, ‘in our midst’ means.

It would be easy, from both the introduction, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like ...’, and Jesus’ explanation, ‘The children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one’, to get the idea that this is a parable about the church. There are members who are loyal, faithful followers of Jesus living out the kingdom in love and action, and there are members with evil motives, trying to twist the church into something other than a community of the people of God. And it’s easy to take that meaning and point to mega churches and TV evangelists that are all about money and power, or Christian cults that are about fear and hatred, or the sexual predators who have used the church for their own desires. And it’s easy to see the flip side of this interpretation and point to those who have failed to see the danger of chasing after the ‘weeds’ and have damaged faithful people through zealous discipline. The Inquisition, the medieval witch trials, the Reformation wars. And while all of that is a valid interpretation of the parable, it’s reading Jesus’ words 2000 years later, from our point of view and experience and not trying to hear what he was teaching the people and the disciples.

Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels, and that is not just because of application of scriptural prophecies, or the underlying idea that the church is the new kingdom of Israel, but through the clear idea that the zealous followers of the Law are the enemy of the new way of love in Jesus Christ. This is probably because Matthew’s community was mostly Jewish in origin and membership. This parable, only in Matthew, is about those who look and sound like the followers of God but are trying to drag people back to the Law. A situation we see played out in the letters of Paul where he warns about those wandering teachers who said you had to fulfil all the Law to be real Christians. And so, the parable sits as a warning to all of us to resist the voices calling for certainty and ‘God given’ Law and moral and cultural correctness, rather than following the way of freedom and love.

The wonder and power of parables is that they are a bit mysterious, and open to different viewpoints and interpretations. Like the parable of the Sower that we looked at last month, it’s a pity that Matthew put in the interpretation from Jesus, because the parable on its own invites interpretation of what it means to have opponents that look,

and sound just like us. And that is us! The seed of the gospel has been planted in us but the world, and the culture, and our families plant other seeds that grow to look and sound very similar, but they drag us away from fully and faithfully following Jesus. The passage from Paul in the letter of Romans is well known because we can all relate:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

The wheat field can be us and the conflict between the wheat and the darnel can happen in us. And because all these feelings and attitudes and understandings of humanity are so deeply intertwined in our hearts and minds, trying to root out the bad thoughts can endanger the good. Push hard on the demands of Jesus teaching - give all to the poor, stand up to the world, declare yourself to family and friends as a disciple - and you will see the doubts arise, the guilt build, and the anger flare, just as much as if you name and shame the prejudices and desires of the world. We are such complex beings.

And thinking about what 'in our midst' can mean opens another interpretation. We are not called to be a Christian, moral enclave apart from the world. We are not Noah's Ark, leaving the sinful world to suffer its own, deserved punishment. In the explanation from Jesus, he says the seeds of wheat are sown in the world. We are called to be in the world, sharing and caring and loving and accepting and welcoming. But there are opponents, even opponents that look and sound like us, who are not sharing, caring, loving, or accepting, but are deceiving people into other ways to be right with God. Not other religions, but cults and fads and charlatans, using the name of Jesus or the tag of Messiah to get power and money. And, like the profusion of denominations, chasing after those charlatans risks the faith and health of those who have been fooled, and the public name of Jesus.

Application and interpretation of this little parable of a complex wheatfield is interesting but the tag line at the end is so hard. Hope and patience. Leave the sorting and judgement to God in a time and kingdom that we can only dimly imagine or hope for. And patience, and faith, that acceptance and endurance - waiting for the harvest - is less damaging to people than confrontation and opposition - rooting them out. In fact, there are many who take this parable as a call to love and guide and teach those who are opponents of Jesus so that they can be turned into followers.

Let anyone with ears listen! Ears of faith, ears of love, ears of openness to the wonders and complexities of stories that reflect the wonders and complexities of humanity. We are a wheatfield in a wheatfield in a wheatfield, trying to be faithful to God in the midst of opponents and motives and desires that don't reflect Jesus; focus on your faith and on Jesus and leave the opponents to God.