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July 23, 2017
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The parable of the wheat and the tares.

A tare is an injurious weed resembling wheat when it is young. So the two grow up side by side and at first it's hard to tell them apart.

Matthew creates this parable to talk about the kingdom of God and what he perceives to be the struggle of the early Christian community to define themselves over against an evil world. He uses the phrase Kingdom of Heaven rather than Kingdom of God because for Matthew and his audience the name of God is unutterable...God is something we cannot fully understand. So, how can we definitively capture God in a name? We can't.

Evenso, for Matthew there is a fight to the finish between the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, and the evils of this world. And the realms of good and evil, cautions Matthew, will only be sorted out at the end of the age. Which was coming soon.

So, when the disciples want to get rid of the tares now and are told not to, and remember this is an allegory and not suggested gardening practice, they are told to let the final judgment sort things out.

I said Matthew creates this parable. Because I think he did. Not only the parable but the interpretation he offers. In other words, I don't think this parable goes back to Jesus.

I don't think that Jesus thought, then or now, that we should define ourselves over against an evil world. I rather think he hopes we define ourselves in relationship with God. To define ourselves, know ourselves, understand ourselves, in relationship with God.

I also don't think Jesus would ever call any of us children of the evil one, or the seed of the devil. And I don't for a minute believe that Jesus would threaten any of us, wheat or tare, with a furnace of fire

and weeping and gnashing of teeth. That just doesn't sound like Jesus.

It does sound like Matthew. Matthew has a lot of "us and them" stories. And Matthew assures us "they" will get their comeuppance.

I am struck though by the cleverness of naming the weeds tares, which as I said, look very much like wheat in the beginning. So initially wheat and tares are hard to tell apart. Jesus himself was clever like that. But I still don't think this parable goes back to Jesus.

So, what do we do with a parable that weakly, if at all, reflects Jesus, and how do we deal with an interpretation of a parable that is not something Jesus would say. Not to mention that the judgment that Matthew thought was coming soon didn't happen.

Well, we can look at how the author of this gospel does his best for his purposes to suggest how Jesus might have addressed the toils and hardships of his day. This is something we all do by the way.... Like when we askWhat would Jesus do?? And we give it our best shot.

So, Matthew, knowing Jesus was a master of the parable, decides to create a parable himself. I don't think he got it right.

But the parable does illustrate how we try to make sense of conflict when our interests are at stake and make God part of the ultimate outcome.

I am going to take the liberty this morning of naming a concern that recently received attention on television and facebook. I am choosing this as an illustration of our tendency to see the world as a struggle being between us and them, wheat and tares, good and evil, and how we bring God into it.

There was a recent television interview with the great Dr. William Barber II, a powerhouse of a pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church, Disciples of Christ in North Carolina. Apparently Barber talked about praying, p r a y i n g and preying, p r e y i n g with the

comment that they may sound alike but they aren't. Sorta like wheat and tares looking alike but they aren't.

What followed was quite a kerfuffle about whether praying for our President is ethical or not. Did any of you hear or see this??

Well, I am going to put my foot in this. I suggest that arguing about whether it is right or wrong, to pray for our president is specious. The first time I was accused of making a specious argument I had to look the word up. It means superficially plausible but actually wrong. Is it moral to pray for our president? What kind of question is that?

For those who do not support our president, are we afraid that our prayers could "help" him and that makes us complicit? And if prayer "helps" – whatever that might mean -- why wouldn't we? I think there is something invalid about the question.

What William Barber provoked I think calls the question on prayer and what we think it is, more than it calls the question on the president.

Now I want to clarify....having convictions and sharing them is important. And how we live and what we believe has consequences. It is important to know what we think and where we stand. And then to make our case. I think it was Teddy Roosevelt who said to be neutral between right and wrong is to serve wrong. And William Butler Yates' in his poem *The Second Coming* warned of a time when the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity. We have our opinions and perspectives. And we won't all agree. That is part of public discourse. What I am puzzling about this morning is our tendency to mix up our prayers with "the will of God." That's a sticky wicket. A premise fraught with difficulty.

Which brings me to the question: what do we think prayer is about anyway? What do we think we are doing when we pray? What do we think it does? Do we pray because we see the world in terms of good vs. evil? Right vs. Wrong? Wheat and tares? And we are trying to give the home team an advantage? I can assure you if that's what we think, the other team is hoping for the same.

And what do we think God is doing when we pray?

Do we believe that God can do anything? That God is sovereign? Do we think that God sees the world as good vs. evil? Right vs. Wrong?

And what about that home team? Whose team is God on?

And when God doesn't seem to intervene – which is often – what do we make of that? Does that say something about God? Or us? Do we think we are in a moral struggle with God?

I would wager that most of us here would say we pray...from time to time anyway. We may have differing beliefs. Different practices. But my hunch is most of us would say that we pray. And let me be clear, I am all for prayer. I do it all the time. But the topic for some of us is unsettling.

Perhaps because of our image of God. I think our most common image of God and one most problematic for the issue of prayer, is the God of Supernatural Theism. A somewhat technical term that describes God as divorced from and separate from creation and us. God is out there, somewhere. Way up there in the sky? Looking down on us? Knowing if we've been bad or good? Detached. Observing. Watching us. From a distance. God is a separate "body" if you will. And intervenes, engages with us, only when God so chooses. And we work oh so hard to make our appeal. That God is the God of Supernatural Theism. The view of God we are most familiar with. And is all too prevalent.

And there are those who don't pray because they don't believe in God or in that God. Fair enough.

Let me remind you of my husband's brilliant response to the statement: I don't believe in God. He would say, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." Tell me about the God you don't believe in. And invariably he didn't believe in that God either.

So, when the God of Supernatural Theism doesn't answer our prayers, what are we to think?

How many of us have been told we must not have believed hard enough, or didn't pray rightly, or God must not be pleased with us, or we are unworthy, or there was "sin in the camp." And when our prayers, our laments, our cries are not answered how often do we fear God isn't there for us? Or God doesn't care for us? And somehow it is our fault.

....And how often have we been told that when our prayers are not answered God will never give us more than we can bear.....

This saddens and angers me.

If this is what we believe, I don't think we've got it right. I don't think prayer "works" that way. And I don't think God "thinks" or responds that way. I don't think the God of Supernatural Theism, a God who is separate from us and creation....at a distance...who may or may not intervene, ever was, is, or shall be.

Recall from Genesis this morning: I the Lord your God am with you. And will keep you. Wherever you go, I will not leave you....surely God is in this place...and how awesome is this place...and I did not know it.

God is not separate from us. Any of us. Any of us. Whether we be wheat or tares? God is not separate from creation. Any part of it. The sunrise or the whirlwind. Is this too much to embrace?

And how bold is it to pray (from our psalm today, 139):

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in the grave, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

Is this prayer for all of us? Some of us? And what about the wheat and the tares.

Jesus may not have told the story we heard in our Gospel today. But I trust he will help us sort out whatever story we find ourselves in today.