

Sermon for Sunday, July 19, 2020 - "The Wheat Is Not Overcome"

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

What do you see when you look at the world today?
Are you able to see beyond all the weeds, all the evil?
What do you see when you look at your own heart?
Are you overwhelmed by all the anger and judgement and sin within it?
What we see matters.

This parable and my friend, Bishop Regina Hassanally, have been helping me to see differently this week. Regina shared with me what has come for her as she prays with our parable today.

She says, "I picture, in my mind's eye the field Jesus describes. I picture myself in the middle of this field – with all kinds of greenery growing up around me – an imperceptible difference between the wheat and the weeds and a strange comfort in the knowledge that both are there."

She writes, "I am calmed and steadied by the truth that there are both wheat and weeds among us and – in this parable – both are allowed to grow. This truth reminds me that though there are discouraging realities: poor leadership, systemic injustice ... things that can seem too overwhelming to overcome, the gospel truth is that the wheat – the work of God – is not hindered or overcome by the weeds. In the end there is a harvest of both."

The weeds are there, yes, but so is the wheat - the work of God. And the wheat is not hindered or overcome by the weeds.

This summer, Americans have been taking a hard look at really pervasive evil weeds within and around us - the evils of racial injustice and structural inequality. We need to do this work. Racism is not what God intends. It is the work of evil, not the work of God. We need to acknowledge the evil within us and in our society. Please stay with this work. Read, listen, learn, examine the racism within and around you and take action for racial justice. Work to be anti-racist.

Yet as we do this work, it is easy to get overwhelmed by the weeds and the evil. So, Jesus calls us to fix our attention on the wheat, on the growth that God is bringing in the world. What we see matters.

Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey talks about how he learned to see differently. I've shared this story before, recently even during a Wednesday night worship service, but it continues to speak to me, so I want to share it with more of you today. Just after graduating from law school, Cory Booker moved into a low-income housing area in New Jersey because he wanted to make a difference in a disadvantaged community. He sought out Ms. Virginia, the building president, to

say, “Mam, I’m here to help.” Ms. Virginia looked skeptical. He made sure to tell her he was a graduate of Stanford and Yale Law School, mentioned that a few times actually. She didn’t seem overjoyed by his presence, so he just kept talking.

Finally, she interrupted him and said, “Follow me”. She led him down to the street and said, “Tell me what you see.” Booker described the crack houses, the crime, the things that had been stolen from his car the night he moved in - all the problems, all the weeds. The more he talked, the more disappointed she looked. Finally, she shook her head, “You can’t help me”, and she walked away.

Booker ran and caught up with her, “What do you mean, what are you talking about?” he asked. Ms. Virginia turned and said, “Boy, you need to understand something. The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside you. If you’re one of those people who only sees darkness and despair and problems, that’s all there’s gonna to be; but if you are one of those stubborn people who every time you open your eyes you see beauty, you see love, you see possibilities, you see the face of God, then you can be one of those people who helps me.”¹

What we see matters. Jesus must so often look at us the same way Ms. Virginia looked at Cory Booker - grieved at inability to see the good.

Jesus must so often want to take us out on the streets of our country and ask us, “Tell me, what do you see?” If Jesus asked us this, I think we’d tell him about all the racism, all the problems, all the weeds. I imagine we might place special emphasis on the difficult people who just don’t get it, who need to be corrected. “*They* are so angry, so judgmental, so extreme.” “*They* are evil, they are the problem, if only we could root them out.”

And then I think Jesus would say something like, “The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you.” Jesus sees all of the weeds inside each of us and it grieves him. But that isn’t all he sees. Jesus also sees so much wheat, so much that can nurture others, so much of God in each and every one of us, in you. Jesus sees you for who you truly are: beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold. Jesus gazes upon you with love.

Being regarded in this way, with love, can change how we see the world. It can help us to focus on the wheat rather than being overwhelmed by the weeds. The loving gaze of Jesus also helps us to grow and produce good fruit - it can change the field of our hearts. With the love and forgiveness and presence of Christ Jesus with us, then the wheat, the good fruit, the work of God, can flourish within us.

As Bishop Hassanally puts it, “Jesus calls us to continue to grow – in spite of the weeds around us – to continue to grow on up in the field in which we have been planted ...” And, in our following after Jesus we are taught to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit: loving kindness, peace, patience, gentleness and self-control. Through the work of the Spirit we grow in faith – the work of God undeterred by the weeds around us.

Beloved of God, today and each day, Jesus gazes upon you with love, with mercy, with forgiveness. With this gaze, you can bear good fruit.

You can shine like the sun.

¹ Story shared by Senator Booker at the 2019 Festival of Homiletics “Preaching and Politics” in Washington, DC, May 2019.

