

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (July 12, 2020)      Text: All Lessons  
***“The Struggle”***

Where do the problems we face day-to-day come from? I think that’s a question many of us encounter often in our lives. *“How did I get into this mess?” “How could I have been so \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank: foolish, reckless, thoughtless, greedy, inconsiderate, just plain dumb)?”*

*“Is this my fault, or can I shift the blame elsewhere?”* We like raising that question, because then we can get off scot-free. [By the way, the derivation of that term is not “people liberated from Scotland” who have been stereotyped as stingy; it comes from a royal dispensation for one not required to pay the “scot” a royal tax; the origin is Norse, not Gaelic.]

In today’s Gospel, we hear a parable that sounds very much akin to the one we heard last week: the Parable of the Sower. While this one does begin with a sower, it becomes quickly apparent that Jesus is going to use some rather odd agricultural practices in this story.

This sower is the householder — apparently a person of means: He owns fields; he owns slaves; both are signs of wealth. That such a person should himself be sowing seed is the first oddity in the story; landowners generally do not “work” their own land; that’s what slaves are for.

So who is this sower? Jesus tells us ***“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man . . .”*** Which speaks volumes about Jesus (who often refers to Himself as “the Son of Man,” in Matthew’s Gospel). It tells us that Jesus came to do so real work; which goes beyond the normal, *“He was a good teacher, a fine example, a good role model.”* Yes, all that may be true, but Jesus goes way beyond that: He did not come just to tell us about the Kingdom of God, He came to embody and usher in that Kingdom. He does that by demonstrating the truth of His teaching by deeds of power — what we often refer to as miracles.

Notice that in this parable, the seed is not (as was the case last Sunday) ***“the word of the kingdom”*** but rather ***“the children of the kingdom”*** whom Jesus identifies as ***“the good seed.”*** This tells us that those whom Jesus sends out into the world also have work to do; it is work that

probably ought to look something like what Jesus Himself did. Which is . . .? Ah, therein lies the rub. What of what Jesus did are we expected to do? And to what level? What is “kingdom work”? It is a matter of sowing good seed.

Now, in the Parable of the Sower, that means spreading the Word which has first taken root in your own person. But in this Parable of the Weeds, it means becoming, that is growing up to become, a child of the Kingdom. That means being a Kingdom presence wherever you may be.

“Kingdom presence” is more than “witnessing,” although it does involve that; Isaiah said in our First Lesson, ***“You are my witnesses!”*** “Kingdom presence” means standing up for the least among us; sitting with those who are in pain, or mourning, or anxiety, or confusion; going that extra mile to benefit another, even (and maybe especially) if it is inconvenient. Kingdom presence is a healing presence, and more often than not healing is emotional and relational rather than physical.

But, the story doesn’t address only good seed. An enemy is at work, sowing bad seed. If these are equivalent concepts in Jesus’ mind, then this bad seed are bad actors who work to destroy, or at the very least inhibit, the good seed work. This tells us that, within the context of the Kingdom, there are forces that do not support, enhance, or promote the Kingdom’s goals.

So, is it our job to look around to see if we can spot the bad seed that have intermingled in our midst and root them out? No, we need to look within. As was true of the four soils in last week’s parable, it is true here: the struggle continues in each of us between the good seed Jesus has planted within and the bad seed the enemy has scattered over our lives.

When does this bad seed get to us? Jesus says it happens ***“while everybody was asleep,”*** that is, when we aren’t paying attention. St. Peter tells us, ***“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour”*** [1 Peter 5:8]. St. Paul today tells us that we cannot live according to our sinful biases and thoughts; pay close attention: ***“all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”*** The question at issue then is, ***“Who***

*is leading you?”*

Recognize that the problem is vast: “. . . ***the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now . . .***” We live in a broken world; a cesspool of sin. You may not think so until one of the really large chunks in that cesspool begins to mess up your life. Then you realize that something here is not good; the blessings of the Kingdom are not evident. You begin the question the grace of God, even the presence of God. “*Why is God letting this happen?*” “*Why doesn’t God intervene?*” “*What did I do to deserve this?*”

We find few answers, and the ones we find do not satisfy. For instance: “*God is present in every moment; you need faith-eyes to see Him.*” “*You need to trust more.*” “*You need to pray more.*”

Now, each of those statements has value. God is present in every moment (refer to today’s Psalm Song). It is a good idea to work on trusting God. There is never a bad time to pray. But as answers to the struggles of life, they really do not satisfy, because the problems we encounter often leave us isolated, inwardly-directed, and frightened.

According to the parable, God is not about to execute His wrath any time soon. Jesus seems to point to an eschatological answer to the question what is to be done about the bad seed. This is another agricultural oddity; leaving weeds to grow with the wheat does very little good for the wheat.

If we take the seed to mean the “them” (whoever “they” may be!), we can see how we might want the weeds ripped out and tossed away, to leave better soil to nurture and sustain us. But if we take the good and bad seed to be the ancient struggle within us, at what point do we want God to intervene? Wipe us out when we’ve done something wrong, or only when we persist in doing the wrong? And what then of good seed behavior? If I have been wiped out for something bad, can I be resuscitated to reap the reward of the good?

No the counsel of the sower is not to uproot the bad because of the risk of the good being destroyed. But co-existing with evil? Is that our plight? Yes. That is the struggle.

God has, I think, made it plain that He is not going to do any kind of massive rectifying of the world situation any time before the last days. Then, Jesus tells us, ***“The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”*** But until then, we can expect more of the struggle.

This is the way I have come to understand God works this. You know that God created us with a free will. For it to be free it has to be totally free; but it does have limitations. You may will to levitate to the ceiling; it’s unlikely you will suspend the law of gravity. You may will to turn into a bunny rabbit this instant; I think your chances of doing that are slim. But you are free to choose it.

Therein lies our problem: We often make ill-advised choices. God leaves us free to mess up. Why? Because puppets do not offer up true praise and worship. God did not create us to be robots that He programmed to do exactly what we are “suppose to do.”

Most of the time we think free will is a pretty good scheme — until we make a disastrous choice and everything goes sideways. Or somebody else makes a horrible choice and we get in the path of its folly or destructiveness. Or the broken creation flexes its brute strength and crashes down on us.

In every moment God is present, but not just present — active. He is actively arranging the future for us so that we might have the very best He truly wants for us. “Best” here means whatever will bring us more directly into intimacy with Him.

Those choices may be myriad; they may be few — but in every instance a “best” will be there and you are free to choose it . . . as you are free to choose less than “best” all the way to absolute worst (made any choices like that?). What determines your choice? Nothing; but many things will influence it.

You may be cognizant of some of those; others may be so far in the past that you have no living memory of it. For instance, it does make a difference to you that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo. Did you wake up this morning and thank God for Lord Wellington's military prowess, Queen Anne's choice of leaders (and a little thanks to the Prussians who first broke through the French lines)? Of course you didn't. But it's there in that mix of everything that has impact on your choosing: Your mother's education or lack thereof; your great-grandfather's predilection to trim his toenails with a butcher knife; that time you drove your bicycle into a privet hedge and got flipped over the handlebars and broke your forearm.

In that mix, for us, is the Christ-event; and the more it sparkles and radiates into our lives, the more impact it has on our choosing. I repeat St. Paul: ***"all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."*** The more consistently we choose because we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, the more consistently we will be finding that "best" that God builds into every moment.

Paul tells us we ***"have the first fruits of the Spirit..."*** With those, better choices lie ahead. Yet, he reminds us we will ***"groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."*** Theologians like to refer to this as "already . . . not yet." We have what Christ came to give us; we have yet to have all that Christ has in store for us.

Paul goes on: ***"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."*** This, indeed, is the response to the struggle. ***"How did I get into this mess?"*** You chose badly. ***"How could I have been so \_\_\_\_\_ (you fill in the blank: foolish, reckless, thoughtless, greedy, inconsiderate, just plain dumb)?"*** Those were all your choices. ***"Is this my fault, or can I shift the blame elsewhere?"*** Yes, and yes; and it still comes down to choices. We need to view it all through the lens of hope: God is working; God is present.

So be patient — with God; with this broken messed-up world; with others who also make messes and lousy decisions; and with yourself. You are

a child of God, led by the Spirit. That's who you are. And you are a work in progress; God is not done with you yet . . . so He will leave the weeds with the wheat and wait with you until He is ready to have us all ***“shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”***

Amen.