

“Living in Paradox”

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Readings

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Jesus put before the crowd another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 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. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Over the past fifty years or so of my life, I have come to realize that being a Christian means living in a paradox. Every aspect of our religion challenges us to live in an often uncomfortable place with nuanced truth and ambiguity, and it's a challenging place to live. Most of the time, I want simple, black-and-white clarity in my life, and though many have tried to force Christianity into giving it to us, God has never made it that easy. Think of just some of the paradoxes of our faith: God is One, and God is Three. Jesus is God and Jesus is human. The Bible is God's Word, and the Bible is authored by flawed humans. Creation is good, and Creation is broken. And I know you can come up with many, many others that I haven't even mentioned.

Paradox is central to our Christian faith. We are constantly called to hold onto truths that don't make logical sense. But these paradoxes and our reaction to them challenge us to seek deeper understanding from what is proclaimed, what we believe, and how we live into our belief. A prime example of this is when someone we love and admire fails to live up to our expectations. Life is not always as clean and perfect as we want it to be, so how do we use our faith to guide us in these instances? What does it mean to see by the light of paradox? I think it means training our eyes to gaze at uncertainty without flinching. I think it means teaching our souls to love the "both/and," the in-between, the mystery. It takes courage to say, "This is true — and this is true also."

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus invites us to dive deep into this very conundrum. A landowner plants seeds in his field, Jesus tells the crowds. But while everyone is asleep, an enemy sneaks onto the field, sows weeds among the wheat, and goes away. When the plants come up, the householder's servants are baffled. "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?" they ask him. "Where did these weeds come from?" The householder tells them flat out: "An enemy has done this." But when the servants offer to tear up the weeds, the householder stops them. "No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. At harvest time, I'll instruct my reapers to collect, bundle, and burn the weeds, and then I'll gather the wheat into my barn."

When I hear this parable, I see Jesus asking his followers to hold two seemingly contradictory truths in uncomfortable tension. The first is that evil is real, and among us. The second is that our response to evil must include both acknowledgment and restraint. For many who consider themselves progressive Christians, the harder of the two truths to swallow may be that evil is real. After all, "evil" is an old-fashioned, heavy-duty sort of word. Wouldn't we all rather get rid of such ancient language in favor of something softer? Gentler? More enlightened? Even though there are those throughout history who I do consider evil, it rubs against my good senses to call anyone or anything evil when I believe there is good in everyone. But Jesus doesn't share my squeamishness, or maybe yours. He states without flinching that evil is real, intentional, and dangerous. Evil in the parable of the wheat and the weeds is not a mistake. It's not an accident or an unfortunate fluke. The weeds Jesus describes are intentionally sown into the field by a real enemy whose motivations are loveless and sinister.

I read an article in the Washington Post this week that reminded me of people with evil in their hearts. It was about a gay couple in a very small town in Virginia who have run a restaurant there for many years without problems. Since new neighbors moved in next door — new neighbors who happen to have extremely conservative beliefs — the restaurant has faced a barrage of angry

assaults from the neighbors as they try to shut down the restaurant. A security camera even caught one of them throwing a dead rat onto the restaurant's porch and then taking a picture of it. The neighbor couple claims they do not want to shut down the restaurant because it is gay-owned, but it's hard for me to see anything but evil intent when someone throws a dead rat onto a restaurant's front porch and then takes a picture of it. Although I don't like to admit it, I can't deny the reality of evil in our world and in our midst. Each of us individually, and our world in its entirety, contain wheat and weed, good and evil, the fruitful and the poisonous. We are each, at the same time both sinner and saint. To confess this is not to be draconian or puritanical; it is to live in reality.

There is more to be gleaned about evil from this parable than the fact that it is real and harmful. Jesus also says without apology that evil is *doomed*: "At harvest time, I'll instruct my reapers to collect, bundle, and burn the weeds." And again: "At the end of the age, 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."

Here comes that dichotomy again: God loves us, and God will throw us into a furnace of fire. That makes me, and maybe you too, a bit uncomfortable. If all that this is saying is that evil will be punished, why does it rub us the wrong way? What does our discomfort say about us? We are so willing to believe in God's love, but struggle when confronted with God's wrath. But what is compassion, in the end, without justice? If there will never be an actual making right for the most victimized among us, then what is the Gospel, and why are we bothering with it? Isn't that the Good News of Christianity, that oppression will end and injustice will die; that the wheat will thrive and the weeds will not? "All causes of evil and all evildoers," Jesus says, will be exposed and disempowered. *All causes of evil*: the causes we condemn in others, and the causes we complacently excuse in ourselves; the causes that are personal, and the causes that are systemic; the causes we know about, and the causes we don't. No exceptions. In short, all that chokes, starves, breaks, distorts, poisons, and harms God's beloved will burn away, not because God hates the world, but because God loves it. And if we consider ourselves a part of this religion called Christianity, then as Jesus instructs us, we are called to respond to evil with both acknowledgement and restraint.

We don't need to look too far to find plenty of evil, of examples of weeds overtaking the wheat in our own backyard. A woman's right to control what happens to her own body; gay, non-biological parents having their names removed from birth certificates; banning books that have a different perspective from ours; disallowing truthful historical teaching on race because it challenges our ideologies, etc., etc. etc. I completely understand getting all worked up about the weeds as the householder's servants do in this parable. How many of us tend to get angry and preachy and passionate when we experience evil in the world? But Jesus insists on patience, humility, and restraint. Jesus asks us to accept his timing instead of ours when it comes to destroying the evil around us because he knows that we cannot always discern between the wheat and the weeds. On our own, there is no way we can police the wheat field without damaging the wheat. There is no way we can rid ourselves of everything bad without distorting everything good. When we rush ahead of God and start yanking weeds left and right, we do terrible harm to ourselves and to the field. Our sincerity devolves into arrogance. Our love devolves into judgment. Our holiness devolves into hypocrisy. And the field suffers.

The fact is, the seeds of God's life in us are still young and growing. Our roots are delicate and tender, and they need time. They need *lifetimes*. This is not to say we should ignore evil, but it is to say that we should move gently and with great care, recognizing that our task is to grow the good, not burn the bad. Our job is to bless the field, not curse it. Remember, the field is not ours, it is God's. Only God knows it intimately enough to tend it. Only God loves it enough to bring it safely to harvest.

So once again we are called by Jesus to a complicated in-between, a paradox. Evil is real and among us, and yet our response to evil must include both acknowledgment and restraint. If this ambiguity worries you, then remember that we are held and braced by a God who is too big for thin, one-dimensional truths — *and this is a good thing*. It's not that we hold paradox; it's that paradox holds us. We are held in a deep place, an ample place, a generous, sufficient, and roomy place. Though we might fear paradox, God does not, and it is in God's soil that we are firmly planted. We're safe, even in the contradictions. Messy and weedy for sure, but safe.

