

“Eden Revisited”

Reading: Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Today we find ourselves back in the middle of agriculture in this teaching from Jesus. That’s hardly an unusual setting for Jesus’ parables, of course; He loved to teach using earthy things like soil and grain and trees. We shouldn’t be surprised, since He often spoke to earthy people who spent their lives doing earthy things. As we’ve pointed out before, most humans throughout most of history were much more tied to the land than any of us are. They lived by hunting and gathering and growing and herding, and so if you wanted to teach people what God is like, it just makes sense to use familiar images.

And, as we’ve said before, even beyond the teachings of Jesus, much of the Bible makes use of these sorts of images. God’s people are often compared to vines or livestock. From the very beginning, God is cast in the role of a gardener, shaping His creation and getting His hands dirty in the mud as He crafts humanity. Later on, as He calls for Himself a people out of the ruin of His garden that has been marred by sin, at times God compares them to a vineyard that He has cultivated and protected and planned. Last week, Jesus compared people to the soil in how they received the seed of the word, and today we return again to that metaphorical garden where God spends so much of His time.

This is one of the parables, like last week’s, in which Jesus takes the time to explain the meaning to His disciples. It’s somewhat unusual how much detail He goes into. Usually with parables we don’t assume that there’s an allegorical meaning for every detail mentioned in the parable. It’s better to dig for the meaning Jesus intended in the parable and leave it at that, because once you start assigning meaning to all the details, you may never end, and you can easily make the parable unrecognizable. The early church often interpreted parables in this way, and though there’s value in their teachings, now we’re more likely to think that they went beyond what Jesus probably intended. For example, an early church father named Origen said this about the parable of the Good Samaritan: “The man who was going down [to Jericho] is Adam. Jerusalem is paradise, and Jericho is the world. The robbers are hostile powers. The priest is the Law, the Levite is the prophets, and the Samaritan is Christ. The wounds are disobedience, the beast is the Lord’s body, the [inn], which accepts all who wish to enter, is the Church. ... The manager of the [inn] is the head of the Church, to whom its care has been entrusted. And the fact that the Samaritan promises he will return represents the Savior’s second coming.” You don’t need to go to that level of detail to get Jesus’ point about the parable.

And so today I’m trying to be careful in reading our parable without reading *into* our parable. Jesus assigns meaning to the various characters and makes it clear that this is a pretty serious subject; some of the inhabitants of this “field” end up getting consumed by fire. Eternal destinies are on the line in this field, and in reality we’re dealing with a parable whose story continues to the end of time.

There is a sense in which this field calls us back to the original garden of God’s creation. I don’t think Jesus was necessarily making the comparison in this parable between the field and the Garden of Eden, but I think we can say that they both display the same basic struggle taking place. The same drama that unfolded in Eden is still unfolding in this field; the same conflict is still being fought. It touches on some of the most important questions we ask: why is there evil in the world? How can

God be good if He allows such evil to exist? What should our response to evil be? How ought we to live in such a world? Where is history taking us?

The farmer, who represents Jesus, sows the good seed of His kingdom in the field of the world. An enemy, the devil, sneaks in and sows weeds among them. The future of the field seems to be in doubt. How can a good crop be harvested out of such confusion? The ultimate thrust of the parable is that question: what will come of the field? How can the sower make good on His efforts? It's one of the ultimate questions we all ask, really. In the end, when all is said and done, when the harvest has been gathered, when the world is finished and we look back on everything that has happened, will the harvest be good or will it be ruined? Will God's work in history be a success? Will suffering have meaning?

But there are other questions raised first, and in some ways I think these are the more interesting ones. There is this question raised by the servants, whom Jesus does not identify for us. "Sir," they ask, "didn't you sow good seed in your field?" That question grips me. As soon as it becomes clear that something has gone wrong, these servants turn to their master and expect an answer from Him. I'm not sure how sharply we should take their question. Are they accusing the sower of sabotaging His own field? Are they suggesting negligence or ignorance on the part of the sower? Whatever their motivations, and of course Jesus doesn't take us to that level of detail, we immediately see the payoff of the enemy's scheme. Aside from the issue of possibly ruining the field when harvest time comes, the enemy has already managed to sow confusion in the household of the master farmer.

This enemy's goal is not merely to destroy the field, you see. He does not attempt to set it on fire, which would seem to me to be a much more effective way of ruining the harvest. No, he's too crafty for that. He relies on subtlety and confusion, using weeds that look very close to the real thing, sneaking in at night so that everyone wonders who's to blame, and maybe it's even the farmer Himself. Again, this is the drama of Eden playing out in Jesus' parable, and playing out in your life and mine today. He slithers in and whispers, "Did God really say...?" Burning the field would be too obvious, too overt. If he marches straight up to you and tries to convince you of something you know is wrong, it's much easier to recognize the devil for what he is. But if he sidles up to you and gets you questioning whether God is really good, whether God is really in control, whether God's word really says, well, that's much harder to resist. That's not an outright attack, that's just asking questions.

In the kingdom of God, there are weeds. In the midst of God's greatest work in the world, in those times of miracle and amazement and wondrous signs, there will be weeds. There will be those in the midst of the church who can be described as nothing other than weeds. Perhaps one of the most common complaints about the church is that we're full of hypocrites, and my response is that you're absolutely right. Jesus said we would be. There are weeds in the field, and the presence of those weeds brings confusion and doubt. What good is the field? How smart is the farmer? And Jesus says, no, don't be surprised, there is an enemy at work, and this is how he works.

And so the next question then is what we ought to do about those weeds. The obvious answer is that you pull them out; that's what you do with weeds. But again, at the risk of reading too much into the parable, I have to wonder if the enemy wouldn't love to see the servants trampling through the field, pulling up weeds left and right, doing far more damage to the harvest than good. These

particular weeds are the sort whose roots get tangled up with the roots of the grain, so pulling the one risks pulling the other. Kill the weed and you might kill the grain. The enemy could have set fire to the field, but no, wouldn't it be much better if the farmer's own workers did the damage for him?

But this particular farmer has an unusual amount of concern for His crops. He uses an arithmetic that is foreign to us in His calculation of the risks. Most of us would probably think that you've got to get the weeds out of there no matter what. If you don't get them out as soon as you can, they'll reproduce, and there's no telling what damage they'll do in the long run. Eradicating the weeds is worth the risk of losing a few of the good crops. But not so in this field with this farmer. For Him, the good seed is so valuable that it is not to be risked. When the harvest comes, then there will be time for sorting, but not until then, and not by the servants. That will be left in the hands of the skilled harvesters, who can properly tell the difference.

Last Sunday I shared with you some of the travails of my gardening experience, and some of the factors that have been against my harvesting of much of any kind of crop. Believe it or not, with all of the problems I listed, I really haven't had many problems with weeds. Over the last week, though, my biggest problem has been Japanese beetles on my eggplant; they seem to arrive *en masse* and line up with military precision along the leaves to chow down. I have to go out every day to squish as many of them as I can. There's a certain pleasure in that, to be frank: I'm making progress, I'm protecting my eggplant, I'm destroying the pests. But what really counts is the growth of the plant. Without good soil and sun and water and fertilizer, without those slow and unseen sources of nutrition and energy and life, fighting off the invader is a waste of time. The plant would starve before the beetles could kill it.

Jesus reminds us in this parable that the maintenance of God's kingdom is ultimately God's job. Our job is to be good seed that produces good fruit. Pulling the weeds, and the larger task of determining which are weeds and which are crops, is not generally our task. We see problems and evil and sinners and hypocrites and fakes, and we want to charge in and root them out in the name of the kingdom of God, and we forget that vengeance belongs to the Lord. We forget that many of God's people's most shameful times have come when we have chosen the wrong battles to fight rather than focusing on bearing the right fruit. Instead, though its power is not as immediately evident as pulling out weeds, the most powerful thing we can do to confront evil is to live lives of faithfulness and holiness.

That doesn't mean that we simply tolerate blatant, unrepentant sin and evil, but it does mean that our first and most important task as God's people is not to hunt down God's enemies, it is the slow, patient task of following Christ, growing deep roots, and producing good fruit of holiness. This is the far greater task of the church, and I submit to you that it will, in the end, be a far greater witness for Christ than going on a crusade to take out those we consider weeds. There are some times to confront and correct those in error, but all times are times for bearing fruit. Certainly, we ought to call evil what it is, and sin what it is, but first comes the example of a life devoted to Christ, and Jesus does not give us license to destroy the evildoer lest we also injure our brother or sister in the process. We aren't always the best judges of who turns out to be good seed, and who turns out to be a weed.

The call of this parable to those of us who would be good seed is a call to patience, to obedience, and to humility in our relations with those who look an awful lot like weeds. We face hard

times and hard people, and yet the end is in God's hands, and we trust judgment to Him. At the same time, the call of this parable to those of us who are weeds is much the same: we trust judgment to God's hands, and God is faithful. He is moving history toward its culmination; He will bring His work to its completion, and that will involve the separation of the wheat from the weeds. The good news is that we're not always very good judges of who turns out to be a weed in the end. There is hope in turning to Christ.

Paul speaks of this in our epistle reading for today. The whole of creation, the entire field, is living in this awkward time of tension while it is subject to futility. The weeds and the wheat are intermingled, and the outcome would seem to be uncertain. But there is hope; creation will be set free from that tension. "If you live according to the flesh, you will die," Paul says, "but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live." The Spirit sets us free from fear and grants us an adoption as co-heirs with Christ in His kingdom. And so we live as those with hope, and as we live in holiness, we serve as witnesses to the redemption of creation.



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