

“What Just Happened?” 7-23-17

Psalms 139: 1-12, 23-24

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

I was a child. I knew the pleasantries of family gatherings at Christmas and Easter. Then all of a sudden they ended. I overheard the emotions of anger and words directed toward other family members I innocently loved as a child. “What had they done?” I asked. What just happened?

On September 11<sup>th</sup> people arrived at their offices to take on another day. Reading and sending emails, grabbing a cup of coffee as the day began, making phone calls and receiving phone calls, a day just like any other. Then it happened. In just moments the twin towers are crumbling, people scurrying and screaming, sirens and rescue workers moving to the disaster as fast as they can, the world we all knew changed in an instant. For eight blocks buildings are deserted, windows broken, debris and “pieces of steel jutting out from floors high above the street”. What just happened? (Yancey, ‘Grace Notes’, p.298).

J.R. Tolkien, writing in the Lord of the Rings Trilogy about an inexplicable evil, can be applied to what began happening in the minds of many of us on and after 9-11; “I do not know what is happening. The reason of my waking mind tells me that great evil has befallen and we stand at the end of days. But my heart says nay; and all my limbs are light, and a hope and joy are come to me no reason can deny...I do not believe that darkness will endure!”

Jesus tells another parable describing the Kingdom of God stealthily operating within the world. The world and the human heart, Jesus says, are like a field of wheat and tares. Behind the parable are questions of justice and suffering so much on the minds of people. Jesus is compelling us to draw our own conclusions and do our own thinking. A picture is drawn here of something we see every day in farming country. As the parable fixes itself in our minds we are drawn to consider its implications of truth and meaning on multiple levels. However, a parable such as this also conceals truth from those too lazy to think or blinded by prejudice to see. “Let anyone with ears listen!”

This parable is given in the middle of a series of conflicts occurring between Jesus and the religious leaders. Prior to this the crowds have witnessed Jesus’ rejection by his family and the Pharisees. Following this series of parables Jesus is once again rejected by his family.

While sowing the good seeds of God’s kingdom of love, hope, and salvation an enemy creeps in sowing weeds among the wheat. In his explanation Jesus identifies the sower as the Son of Man, the weeds as the children of the evil one and their sower, the devil. Justice is delayed until the end of the age. The reapers separating the wheat and tares at that time are the angels. “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers...Let anyone with ears’ listen!” There is here a cosmic dimension of God’s purposes hidden within the universe causing much perplexity and questioning by the human mind. The power and influence of the evil one, assumed throughout scripture, stand in constant opposition to God’s presence through Jesus and his followers.

Those hearing Jesus tell this parable would have known that a weed, called darnel, familiar to the fields of the day, looked like wheat in its early stages. When both headed out, however, they could be distinguished. The problem is that their roots become so intertwined that the weeds, or tares, could not be weeded without tearing the wheat out with them. The bearded darnel is also poisonous, its effects like a narcotic causing dizziness and sickness, a metaphor for what the facelessness of evil does among us.

And so we hear Jesus teaching us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one”. On a similar note, Paul reminds us, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

Other admonitions in scripture make sense in this context as well. Psalm 37, in its call to patience and trust in God, begins, “Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good...Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Do not fret, it leads only to evil”.

James approaches it from his admonition as to what comes out of the heart through our tongue. “You must understand this: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (James 1:19).

Paul can write to the Romans, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good...Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:9-21).

Walter Wink reframes Paul’s words; “Evil can be opposed without being mirrored. Oppression can be resisted without being emulated. Enemies can be neutralized without being destroyed”.

People still touched by the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, ask “Why?” The element of evil in this tragedy looms large. The hate-filled, racist teenagers, spraying their classmates with automatic weapons, go far beyond our comprehension.

Cassie Bernall’s friends tell of her bravery as a gunman points his weapon at her head and demands if she believes in God. “Yes”, she replies, “and you need to follow God’s path”. Those are her last words on earth. Churches become replete with grieving, angry, and hurt people reaching out to God with the deep petitions of the heart. Where is God in this field of evil weeds? Where did the wheat of justice and goodness go in this field of tares?

A soldier participating in the liberation of Dachau concentration camp in World War 11 talked about his encounter with the evil he witnessed. Seeing human corpses, stacked in neat rows, like firewood, this man spent two hours in the box car moving corpses, feeling the negative emotions and the rage coming in waves.

The SS officers in charge of Dachau were being held in the bunkhouse. The Captain asked for a volunteer to escort the officers to an interrogation center. A man, Chuck, who volunteered took them into the trees and a machine gun was heard. The soldier, back with a smoking gun, said, "They all tried to run away".

The soldier witnessing this said that "It was on that day that I felt called by God to become a pastor. I knew that beyond doubt that I must spend my life serving whatever opposed such evil, serving God...Then came the incident of the officers being shot in cold blood. I had a nauseating fear that the captain might call on me to escort the next group of SS guards, and an even more dread fear that if he did, I might do the same as Chuck. The beast that was within those guards was also within me" (Yancey, p.59).

Take a look at Galatians 5 and Paul's listing of the fruits of the flesh and those of the Spirit. Attitudes of anger, jealousy, enmity, strife and the like lie intertwined in our hearts among a desire for peace, patience, love, self-control, gifts of God's 'Spirit that we nurture. Paul expresses this convulsion of heart so well in his letter to the church at Rome; "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:19). All the wheat and weeds we witness in the social realm are projections of the tension between the weeds and wheat intertwined in the human heart.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, imprisoned in the Gulag, writes his great insight into evil. "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains an uprooted small corner of evil" (Gulag Archipelago).

In a dark secret inner prison in Zambia, built for the worst offenders, Ron Nikkel of Prison Fellowship International shares what he sees. Escorted by a man named Nego, he is led to an almost uninhabitable place. When Nego tells them a chaplain is here, of the 120 prisoners, 80 of them go to the back wall, assemble in rows, and start to sing hymns in beautiful four-part harmony. Thirty-five of them would soon be executed.

Ron Nikkel said, "I was overwhelmed by the contrast between their peaceful, serene faces, and the horror of their surroundings...Behind them on the wall was a charcoal sketch of Jesus on the cross...And it struck me with great force that Christ was there with them, sharing their suffering and giving them joy in such a place" (Yancey, p.332). On the cross of Jesus Christ God lies hidden in evil, hiding under what is the opposite of who God is.

"Let the both of them grow together until the harvest..." Jesus tells us.

I hear this parable telling us to be on guard with our judgments. Though the weeds of injustice loom large in our world, justice and judgment will come in the end. God will do the judging. We are being invited to nurture the Spirit of God as we discern and love walking through the mixed fields of this life.