

July 23, 2023

Proper 11A

Genesis 28:10-19a

Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In the early 2010s, an evangelical megachurch pastor named Rob Bell published a book called *Love Wins*. The subtitle of the book works as a great summary of what it was about: “A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.” Rob Bell, up to this point, had been something of a rising star in the world of evangelical Christianity – he had started a church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that had by this time grown to a weekly attendance of 10,000 people, and he was widely seen as someone who could speak to people who had no interest in the institutional church and connect them with historic Christianity. For a lot of people, including myself at the time, he was a bridge out of conservative religion into a more progressive Christianity.

In the first chapter of *Love Wins*, in response to someone who once asserted that Mahatma Gandhi was in hell, he asks: “Really? Gandhi’s in hell? We have confirmation of this? Without a doubt? What kind of faith is that?”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bell’s book sparked a major backlash in the conservative Christian world. He was forced to resign as pastor of his church; his book was pulled from Christian bookstores. The pastor John Piper, who is an enormously influential presence in the world of evangelicalism, made a now infamous post on social media, “Farewell Rob Bell”: the message being that Rob Bell was disfellowshipped, excommunicated, marked as “dangerous” and no longer a member of the community.

His book made a big splash at the time, but really it was just one more salvo in the long history of our religion having what I’m going to call an *unhealthy* preoccupation with heaven and hell. There are those who find it so important to insist that hell is a real place where people will face eternal conscious torment, and they rely on Bible passages such as the Gospel reading for today. Fire, gnashing of teeth, the sorting of people into good and bad, that sort of thing. Speaking for myself, I find it challenging to read today’s Gospel passage without thinking of how it has been used in this way.

But this idea – that there is a heaven and there is a hell, that we are sorted into one of these places when we die, that hell is a place of eternal conscious torment – is only one among many views, and it’s not particularly historical at that. I’ll just quote a few of the early church Fathers: in the third century, the Christian theologian Origen wrote: “all human souls will ultimately be saved and united to God forever in loving contemplation.” Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century wrote of his belief that: “Evil shall one day be wholly exterminated . . . so that of all who were made by God, not one shall be exiled from God’s kingdom.”

So those of us who believe in, or hope for, universal reconciliation are in good company. Yet I still feel an obligation to grapple with passages like today's Gospel reading. If you look it up in your Bible, you'll probably see this parable labeled, depending on your translation, with the heading "The Parable of the Weeds" or "The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat" or some other similar description. It's easy to hear this parable and think that the primary point of the parable is about the difference between these two groups, and how to distinguish between them. In fact, that is exactly what the disciples do in the second half of the Gospel reading: they approach Jesus and say: "Please explain the parable of the weeds of the fields." Their focus is on the weeds.

But that's not Jesus focused on. Jesus instead redirects our focus by saying: the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed. We could call it the parable of the Sower of Good, or maybe, the Parable of Letting all the Plants Grow Up Together. Because when people come to Jesus and ask: do you want us to pull up these weeds, Jesus says: no, we're not going to sort between the weeds and the wheat; we're not going to decide who is good and who is bad; who deserves to live and who deserves to die. At least not today.

As Christians, we believe in resurrection. We believe in life after death. What exactly that will look like, I can't tell you. If someone tries to tell you they know exactly what is going to happen to you after you die, they're not telling you the truth. So I don't want to ask what this parable tells us about the afterlife. I want to ask what this parable tells us about the nature of God, and God's will in the world today.

What this parable tells us is that we are not to sort people. We are not supposed to go out telling people: *you* are in the kingdom and *you* are not, *you* are a weed and *you* are a wheat. We don't get to go up to someone and say: "Farewell, you're out."

This is a hard thing to do, because I can think of plenty of people who claim the mantle of Christianity whom I would love to condemn as weeds, whom I think are harming others by strangling their growth. And I wish that this faith were not being represented like that out in the world. I want to be clear that I'm not advocating against calling out and struggling against injustice in the world. But I believe that we can do so without denying that any person is a beloved child of God – even those who would not say the same about us – and without denying that God desires reconciliation with them just as much as God desires reconciliation with you and me.

I'm not at all a gardener, but the rest of my family loves plants. A few years ago, my parents were out in the garden, weeding it, when my mom suddenly cried out to my dad: "No, stop! Don't pull out those plants." My dad said "But they're weeds, they're not supposed to be there." To which my mom responded, "Yes, but they're pretty. I like them. I want to keep them"

The point is that there's no scientific test you can perform to decide whether a plant is a weed or a wheat. You can't run a DNA test on it, or put it under a microscope to say, yes, this is a weed. It is, at its heart, a subjective distinction, not an objective one. It depends entirely on who is looking at the field in which the plant is growing, and whether that person wants it to be there or not. What I might consider a weed, you might consider a beautiful flower. What you might consider a weed, I

might consider a medicinal herb. A plant that is an invasive species in one field, is simply a natural and healthy part of the ecosystem somewhere else.

God created weed and wheat alike. When God is the Gardener, all God's creation is Very Good. As we heard in the Epistle for today, *all creation* waits with eager longing for the coming of God. Just as *the whole creation* was bound by sin, so will the whole creation be set free to the glory of God. Even when it's hard to believe in it, we hope for what is not seen. We keep the hope that because our God is all powerful and all loving, God wants to redeem all God's creation. And because God wants it, so will it be done. Amen.

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