

“Living with the Enemy”
Romans 8:12-25 Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

There are many voices today that encourage us to view this age in which we live as an anxious age. When our view is focused on ourselves we can be mightily tempted to believe that we live in the most anxious time in history. One pastor I read this week described it this way. She wrote, “When I sit with my morning paper and morning coffee, I have a sense that I’m hovering on a threshold, anxiously waiting for the other shoe to drop.”¹ If only we knew what was going to happen then we would be able to be adequately prepared and live securely. My initial response to that anxiousness is just to simply suggest that perhaps if she didn’t read the newspaper so much and drank less coffee she just might find some relief from her anxiety.

But we are not the first people or the first age to feel that we live in an age of anxiousness. In the passage from Romans Paul tells us that the entire creation is anxiously waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Waiting with eager longing, for what? For something, we’re not quite sure what, we have not yet seen it, but we hope for a time of fulfillment, a time of being set free from decay, a time of a kind of freedom that we groan for but have not yet experienced. Right now, all we have are the groans, we experience the reality of suffering – Paul interjects that all human suffering will be finite and will have the divine potential of not just being an end in themselves, but a kind of labor pains for a new creation.

But we are not there yet. This age in which we live is the meantime, and in the mean time we wait. We wait for a reality that is beyond our control, beyond our ability to understand. Last week in talking with the children I had some seed packets with beautiful pictures of flowers on the front, but when we opened them up and looked at the seeds there is no way we could ever have predicted what those seeds were capable of becoming. As people of faith and children of God we are in the same position.

There is a similar kind of anxiousness in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Good seed has been planted in a good field but lo and behold, what should have been a bountiful harvest looks like a big mess, the field is half full of weeds, and the slaves of the owner of the fields are beside themselves, “Where did all these weeds come from?” In their anxious zeal they are eager to do something, to organize a crusade to attack the weeds, and the Master stops them, “No! Don’t be so fast! In your haste, you may do more harm than good!”

Matthew tells us that Jesus set this parable before them. I must admit. I am not entirely convinced by Jesus explanation of the parable. I am not at ease with it because it almost offers too much. I can almost hear the tone of the disciples when they manage to talk to Jesus when he is away from the crowds and they have him to themselves, and they say, “OK Jesus, its just you and us now, we

¹ Margaret Guenther in [Christian Century](#), July 15, 2008

are your disciples, you are going to need us to further your kingdom so it is only right that we have an inside track here. Whisper the secret in our ear. Because once we know, then we will know.”

When I was in college one of the benefits of being a member of a social fraternity was that every fraternity kept a file of all the examinations that had been given over the last several years for various courses. So, if you were so inclined, you could get a real advantage for an examination by having a copy of the examination beforehand. But parables don't teach like that, and even with Jesus' explanation, the explanation by itself, I'm not too sure how revealing it is. Parables, I would suggest are designed to surprise, more than they reveal.

Let me give a personal, specific example. I have been the Pastor of this congregation for just over two years now. When I first learned that I would be appointed here Noni sent me all kinds of information about the church, including copies of the weekly bulletin. I was looking for all the information I could get. One thing I was interested in was what was this church's sense of mission and purpose? What was God up to here, if that is not too audacious of a question.

There is a Mission Statement set before us, printed on the front over of the bulletin every Sunday. I am not sure that we pay it much mind. To tell the truth, the main reason that I have left it there is because I didn't have anything else to put in its place. It never either quite made sense to me or seemed to flow. I just didn't get this, “We are instruments of God.” Instruments? Are we supposed to be some kind of tool or musical instrument or what? It just didn't make sense. At the same time, I do believe that it is very important for every community of faith to have a unified sense of purpose and mission, so to that end we have been working through a process called ReFocus.

One principle that this process is based on is that “personal transformation precedes corporate renewal.” A small group in our church has been meeting, but one reason that you have not heard a lot about this so far is that, for me at least, personal transformation takes a different kind of patience. It takes more than a kind of pious persistence; it means allowing things to unfold in God's timing not mine. I am a bit of a stubborn old coot to personal transformation is not an instant fix.

As some of you know, one thing I have been doing over the last 17 months is to devote myself to a particular method of praying that involves intentional time in silence, as a symbol of my “intention to consent to God's presence and action.” Earlier this summer, as a portion of our time away, we attended a prayer retreat at St Francis Springs Retreat Center, in North Carolina. It was a precious use of time where I was humbled and grateful to be a participant; it is difficult to describe in words. For one thing, there weren't many words, but there was a shared intention.

The few times we did speak together we gathered in a very nice conference room, and in front of us, there was a banner of the prayer of Saint Francis known as the Peace Prayer. It was only after several days, that eventually a little light came on. It was like a little green shoot appeared, "It is a prayer, 'Lord, make me an instrument'" To refresh your memory this is the prayer. You should have a copy of it. It is not so much that we are instruments as we pray to be made into instruments of God. We are called to put ourselves at God's disposal. This prayer talks about sowing seeds, and its not too much of a stretch to look at them as two kinds of seeds. There are the weedy seeds, if you will, seeds of hatred, seeds of injury, seeds of doubt, seeds of despair, seeds of darkness, seeds of sadness. That may not be an exhaustive list. I could add "envy, strife, greed, false pride." You may very well be able to add others. They are real; they are there; we can feel so anxious about them, but that is not all there are.

On the banner the good seeds were all highlighted in yellow because they are the ones that last, they are the only ones that last. They are seeds of love, seeds of pardon, seeds of faith, seeds of hope, seeds of light, seeds of joy. Those seeds are worth surrendering to in our lives; they are worth nourishing in our lives.

It is hard for me to put into words what that insight has meant to me as your Pastor, but I know that they are seeds worth nourishing.

Did you notice in the parable how un-anxious, is the Master, the owner of the field? It is much easier for us to identify with the slaves who are crying out, "Where did all these weeds come from?" "What do you mean – don't go out and pull the weeds?" In the middle of all our anxiety and anxiousness this parable says, "Don't be anxious about what the Lord is not anxious about."

What is the Master concerned about? He cares about the roots. He cares about the ultimate source of our identity. The good seed is never really threatened by the weeds. The weeds may look more powerful; they are propped up by the artificial supports of expediency and popularity. The weeds claim to be concerned with end results, but the enemy never assumes any real responsibility.

This parable of the weeds gives us a different view of patience and hope in Christ; it is far different than just an exercise in pious persistence. Jesus talks about the end of the age and the coming of the harvest that requires of us a kind of waiting, but it is much different than waiting at the airport until our flight is announced. It is different than standing in line at the supermarket checkout. That kind of waiting is more tedium than anxiety.

Waiting for the in-breaking of the kingdom is like no other kind of waiting. It is having the love to wait in the middle of hate. It is holding on to the confidence in the power of forgiveness so that we can wait in the middle of deep hurt and

injury. It is the humble prayer of faith that waits even when surrounded by the reverberating echoes of doubt. It is a kind of waiting that seeks to be fully present in a hopeful today even when despair seems the more reasonable outcome. It is affirming light even when our voice is quivering because we are surrounded by a darkness that is so thick it feels like a fog that will never lift. It is believing in joy even when that feels forced and artificial and it is only sadness that seems to be real.

Waiting for the in-breaking of the kingdom acknowledges the reality of evil in our midst, but resists every recruitment slogan to enlist in a zealous crusade against evil. This parable recognizes that human beings often have a way of responding to evil in ways that actually produce more evil, however unintended. In our zealousness to 'do something' we are very capable of acting in ways that, far beyond our best intentions, actually perpetuate evil and violence rather than creating peace.

Like the disciples we are often seeking more understanding and real explanations. But all along it is the word that understands us more than we will ever have the awareness to see ourselves as God sees us. Jesus uses some vivid imagery in describing what will happen to the weeds, the causes of sin and evil doers. They will be thrown into the furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Have you ever thought about that or tried to picture that image, the gnashing of teeth, it seems to me to be an excruciating and frustrating place to be, gnashing of teeth, wanting to say something but no longer able to. Could it be that these are people who have lost the capacity to say YES to God's love? Saying YES to Jesus Christ asks a daily surrender of our lives.

We can be tempted to think that doing the Lord's work is all up to us. We forget who we really are. The problem is that in reality we are not wholesome stalks of wheat forced to grow amidst the poisonous presence of the deadly weeds. The problem is that each one of us is a field of ourselves, a growing crop of mixed motives and mixed up minds. We are both wheat and weeds.

We are "adam" and "adamah," men and women created in the very image of God. Yet at the same time we are also Adam and Eve, listening to the serpent, biting into the forbidden fruit, letting disobedience and sin establish themselves within our hearts and souls.

We are both wheat and weeds. We are capable of great good and we are also capable of great evil. The roots of both are so intertwined about our souls that no human surgeon could ever hope to extricate them from each other. There is only one master healer who can accomplish that surgical miracle.

Jesus' message is not just that there is undeniable, eternally entangling weediness in all of us. Jesus message is also that there is genuine goodness, the very stuff that makes up the bread of life, present within us. Only the judge who gave up his life for us on the cross has the ability to separate us from our dual natures and make us finally and fully whole.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev Stephen G. Hoffman

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First United Methodist Church of Palmetto