

CAN JUDGMENT BE GOOD NEWS?

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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There's no point in telling a story unless people understand it. People won't understand it if you don't use language they can relate to. The parables in the Bible use imagery that was familiar to the people of a certain place and time. This morning's parable reminds us that the people of Jesus' time were primarily agricultural people. They would follow this story easily. They could picture a farmer going out one day to plant wheat. When that farmer is in bed, sleeping soundly after a hard day of labor in the fresh air, the devil sneaks into the field and plants weeds right alongside the rows where the wheat had been planted. A few weeks later, the farmworkers notice the weeds. They're everywhere! Mixed in right with the wheat! The workers go to the farmer and say, "This is terrible! We'll go in and start picking the weeds right away!" But the farmer says, "No. Wait. Let's wait. If you start pulling weeds, you might accidentally pull up a good piece of wheat, and that's the worst thing that could happen. The harvest will come. And at that time, it will be easy to judge which is the wheat and which are the weeds. We'll let it all be sorted out then. The weeds will be burned. Until then, we wait."

Most of us are not farmers; most of us haven't spent our lifetimes planting fields and harvesting crops. So it may be difficult for us to relate to this parable. Let me try telling it a different way. Let's say there is a church and the church is growing. New members are welcomed into the church, they're introduced, their names are told, and where they work, and information about their families is shared, everyone claps and celebrates. When they stand in front of the congregation, dressed up, wearing their boutonnieres, it looks like a

proud bumper crop of people. Their data is entered into the church computer. But one night, someone evil hacks into the church computer. New names are added, of people who did not attend the Inquirer's classes. Some of these people have made mistakes in their past. Some of these people have less-than-perfect family relationships. Some of these people are struggling with addictions of one kind or another. When the mistake is discovered, the church council meets. What are we going to do about it? You see, this computer hacker was very clever. We can't tell which members are real and which were added. Should we just delete everyone?

And let's imagine that Church Council, in their wisdom, says, "Let's just watch for a few months. We'll be able to tell which members are real and which are just faking it." And all of the Church Council members pay great attention for the next few months. They watch to see if worshipers look sincere, they observe behavior at coffee hour, hoping to see someone stashing cookies into their pockets or purses. One of these "fake" members infiltrates Bible Study, intent on converting everyone there to false teaching. But there is something about the kindness in the room, the honest questions that are asked, so that this person is drawn in, and pretty soon she stops reporting to the evil one who had sent her there, and she starts attending of her own accord and feels like a part of the community. Church Council members try their best but they just can't find any of the fake members. There are new people in the choir, but Mary Fancher reports that they are singing on key and smiling, they attend the choir parties and don't try to poison anyone.

So at the next Church Council meeting, after a lot of head-scratching, Moderator Wilhoite says, "You know, it may be possible that these so-called fake members have fully assimilated into the life of our church. It may be that our acceptance of them has helped

them grow and change. Maybe we should just stop worrying about it and leave the judging, and the categories, to God.” And Council unanimously agrees.

There’s so much judging in our world today, isn’t there? There are entire television channels made up of nothing but competitions. There are voice competitions, and dance competitions, cooking competitions, cupcake baking competitions. If everything is a contest, then there’s a lot of judging going on. And judging is so easy to do. We judge one another, based on the way someone is dressed, the car he drives, the tattoos she sports. We judge ourselves, sometimes much more harshly than anyone else would judge us.

Some people grow up thinking of God as a judge. They picture God sitting on a throne, watching over us, making notes, keeping a ledger, or these days an Excel spreadsheet, noticing the things we do wrong more than the things we do right.

I’ve spent much of my career trying to draw a different picture of God, a more complete picture, for the Bible portrays many images of God. We see God in the role of parent, friend, creator, sustainer, spirit, redeemer. One of the roles God plays, and only one, is the role of judge. We shouldn’t ignore the judgment stories in the Bible just as we shouldn’t see judgment as God’s only role.

This parable contains a message of judgment. Simply put, God wants us to be wheat in the world and not weeds. God wants us to produce fruit that is useful, to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

It’s easy to completely ignore the judgment stories and focus instead on God’s grace and forgiveness and unconditional love. But the judgment stories have some good and actually positive wisdom for us. One of the best reasons to remember that part of God’s role is to judge is that it alleviates us from that responsibility. If God is judge, we

don't have to be. If God is judge, we shouldn't be. Judgment is not our job. Could Jesus have put it any more plainly? "Do not judge", he says, in the Sermon on the Mount.

This parable reinforces that message. It's not our job to pull the weeds. Let them grow. God has it under control.

Left unsaid in this parable are all kinds of possibilities. There is the almost certain possibility that God's vision is sharper than ours. God can tell the wheat from the weeds much better than we can. God can look beneath the surface, beyond the piercings or the blue hair or the cane or the three-piece suit, beyond whatever trappings there are which kick in our own prejudices. God sees through all of that superficiality.

There is also an exciting amount of possibility in the idea that God waits until the harvest to do the judging. Why would God wait unless God believes that some transformation might happen out there in the field? It's left unsaid, but surely it's possible that God sees potential in some of us weeds. None of the weeds are pulled because God knows that some of them just might transform themselves into golden stalks of wheat. You've seen it happen, haven't you? A kid that looked like he was going in the wrong direction somehow turns his life around? And you think to yourself, "Thank God I didn't give up on him." You've seen it happen, haven't you? That the person once addicted finds a new way of life, that the person floundering from job to job, or from relationship to relationship seems to come to her senses and find who she truly is and she blossoms before your very eyes. You don't have to look any further than the book in the pew in front of you to know that God believes that weeds can turn into wheat. Once there was Peter the Jesus-Denier then there was Peter the Rock. Once there was Saul the Christian-Hunter then there was Paul the Church-Builder. Similar stories are everywhere in that book.

In almost every parent-child relationship I know about there is a time when the child resents the parent's strict rules. There is much eye-rolling at this phase, many slammed doors, many cries of "You just don't understand me." And then there is a time when the child is grateful for those same rules. "If my parents hadn't made me study, I wouldn't have been accepted into college." "I'm so thankful that my parents taught me manners." "I'm glad I grew up in a home where they cared enough about me to notice what I was doing."

Isn't there a sense in which God's judgment functions the same way? God's judgment communicates to us that God has standards for us, that God wants the very best for us. What if we picture God as a coach who is cheering us on from the sidelines, not a coach who ever demeans or ridicules or puts down -- not one who ever compares us to others - but a coach who desperately wants us to live up to our potential and therefore experience abundant life. God loves us passionately and has expectations for our lives.

Once a month, before we receive the gift of Holy Communion, we pray together a prayer of confession. We admit the things we have done wrong, we acknowledge the good things we have failed to do. We ask for God's forgiveness, and we receive it. We leave here feeling a little lighter, our burden of guilt and shame lifted. We know we won't be perfect but we know that we are embraced by a God who loves us, a God who loves us enough to set the bar high so that our lives achieve a sense of meaning and purpose.

Let us pray. God, you are our Parent and our Friend, You are our Teacher, our Savior, our Guide, our Companion. Thank you for both your judgment and your mercy. Remind us not to judge one another or ourselves. Teach us the lesson of patience. We pray for the field which is our lives to be productive and fruitful for you, and for the sake of the world you love. Amen.