

Kingdom Parables
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 13:24-43)

The three parables of Jesus in today's Gospel, known as the "*Kingdom Parables*," teach the way God works to accomplish good in the midst of evil.

The first parable is the "*Wheat and Weeds*." Though the Son of Man sows good seed, the enemy comes at night and sows weeds among the wheat. Jesus appeals to the common experience of farmers and gardeners to explain how it is with people in the Kingdom of God: we will find evil in the midst of the church. There are several things to note about evil.

First, evil is *always there*, regardless of our best efforts, or most careful preparations. We work hard to do good, providing as well as we can, serving the needs of others, and in this way following our master's example. Even though we do everything correctly, yet it often still turns out badly, or runs into problems, and we ask God, "what did I do wrong?" Parents often wonder about this when despite their best efforts, children sometimes still go down the wrong path. Likewise in marriages, friendships, and human enterprises: despite sowing good seed, evil somehow finds a way to creep in and wreak havoc. There is an enemy, says Jesus, and he sows discord; he undermines, harms, and attacks. He is relentless, and he works "at night," in hidden cunning ways that are easy to miss. The devil did great harm to Jesus, and continues to do great harm to the Church, constantly undermining and destroying the good which God's people are accomplishing.

Second, evil is *parasitic*. It cannot exist of itself, but only off the good of others, whether God's creation, or the good found in other people. Weeds live off the rich soil carefully prepared by the farmer, and flourish in the environment created for beauty and productivity. Evil leeches off the richness it did not create, only to corrupt and destroy it. Evil is thus a corruption of good, a cancer. When there is evil in a church or community, it is other people's money and resources they use, other people's prior good work they devour.

Third, evil *apes* the good. Evil tries to look good, wants to be accepted as the real thing, and thus find acceptability and survival. Tares look like wheat at first glance, and weeds try to look like good grass or pretty flowers, but their beauty is superficial and deceptive. They are really ugly, and don't belong. To the trained gardener they stick out like a sore thumb, but the casual observer is often deceived.

Because evil is deceptive and apes the good, and because evil inserts itself intricately into the same soil with the good, Jesus gives an important teaching regarding the way to deal with it. Our natural instinct is to uproot it, yet doing so

causes greater harm. Surgeons are often not able to remove a malignant tumor because it is so entwined with the good flesh that doing so will cause greater injury to the body. Likewise, evil is often so ingrained in the system, that to try extricate it will cause even worse harm. Whereas Islam and some other religious sects seek to purify religion even through murderous destruction of the “impure,” Christianity, while in no way condoning or tolerating that which is evil or unjust, nevertheless proclaims a tolerance for evil people, since it is impossible to fully remove them without causing greater harm or damage. Furthermore, it is not as simple as separating “good” people from “evil” people, since everyone has within himself an admixture of both good and evil. Thus Jesus tells his followers to leave the situation until the final judgment on the last day, when the angels will be able to make the clear distinction between the saved and the damned, and justice will be fittingly served. In the meantime, our strategy in the work of the Kingdom will be a different one.

The next two Kingdom parables give guidance with regard to the strategy we should employ in the meantime, when seeking to build up Good, and overcome Evil. Farmers, gardeners, and surgeons know that the best strategy for a fruitful crop or healthy body is not always the heavy pesticides or the blade, but a more subtle approach of managing the types of pests that afflict the wheat, or strengthening the plant via good stock and nutrition. Let the weeds grow with the wheat, but give the wheat advantage by cultivating strength in the plant and providing it adequate nutriment. Likewise, conquer evil, by nourishing the good with the distinct ingredients of the Christian message.

Those programs and approaches that seek to “water down” the Gospel message or *placate* the enemy only end up increasing the weeds! Christianity has to be bold and direct. Just because we cannot excise a cancerous tumor does not mean we leave it unchallenged. In the face of evil, Christians must promote good solid spiritual teaching, which nourishes the true faith, and advances the Kingdom.

In the parable of the “*Leaven*,” Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a woman who mixes in three measures of yeast with the dough, in order to leaven it. The woman is the Church, and she mixes in to human lives the three measures of doctrine, discipline, and devotion (creed/belief, code/morality, cult/worship).

By learning true Christian *doctrine* (the creed, catechism, and Scriptures); by receiving good *discipline* and moral training (via the commandments and laws, virtues, and fruits of the Holy Spirit such as self-control); and by learning *devotion* (prayer, sacramental life, reverence, liturgy) – we acquire wisdom, the ability in the long term to overcome evil, and effect good, to outlast evil and not succumb to its poison.

Our approach then, is not so much one of focusing on the evil and seeking for ways to destroy it, but focusing on the good and seeking for ways to nourish and strengthen it. It is always *medicinal*. Even when a sinner needs to be admonished and a criminal needs to be punished, it is for the purpose of strengthening and defending the body (the community) to the degree possible, and of calling the soul to repentance via penance. It is not simply to annihilate evil.

Good is its own power and strength, evil is ultimately its own self-destruction. The force of good is like leaven in the dough: silent but unstoppable, and effective beyond expectation, mysteriously and paradoxically bearing its fruit despite overwhelming opposition and seeming failure. Whether it is our own personal battle against some bad habit, improving relationships, or helping others, this should be the approach—kneading good leaven into the dough with every ounce of energy and effort this requires; practicing good doctrine, discipline, and devotion with faith and trust in God’s ability to use it for our benefit.

Finally, in the parable of the “*Mustard Seed*,” Jesus reiterates the mystery of the true good, which allows it to conquer evil. Evil always wants to be seen and worshipped. It is proud. It wants the important positions, the wealth, the power, and prestige. It wants to be big. True Good, on the other hand, like God, is always humble. Good is most often found in the “little” things, in fact the smallest things.

Mother Teresa, echoing this teaching of the Gospel and the wisdom learned by all the saints, famously said, “*Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.*” True good is inevitably found in the little hidden tasks, done well and with great love. By paying attention to details, by not looking for shortcuts, by focusing on the individual even if he be tiny or insignificant – these are the mustard seeds of the Kingdom. It is this approach that causes the Church to become the mighty tree that transforms the world, in which birds of all kinds can find hospitality and shelter. Where the Church has become that mighty tree, it is due to the millions of small sacrifices of her members, made with love, who truly served and put others first. The Church accomplishes her greatest work in the world, through the humble tasks, among those whom the world overlooks as insignificant or useless. Not power, but meekness; not wealth, but poverty; not vengeance, but forgiveness; not programs, but persons.

In these parables, Jesus “*announces what has lain hidden since the foundations of the world*” (Mt 13:35). These are the secrets of the Kingdom of God, revealed not to the “learned and the clever,” but only to his true followers, the “little ones” (Mt 11:25). Let us take these teachings to heart, and continue our powerful work in the Kingdom, sowing good, and not being disturbed or discouraged by the evil.