

**The Hard Part**  
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**Romans 8:26-39**

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,  
'For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Matthew 13:24-33, 36-52**

<sup>24</sup> He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup> but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. <sup>26</sup> So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. <sup>27</sup> And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" <sup>28</sup> He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" <sup>29</sup> But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. <sup>30</sup> Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" '

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

<sup>33</sup> He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

<sup>36</sup> Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' <sup>37</sup> He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; <sup>38</sup> the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the

children of the evil one,<sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.<sup>40</sup> Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.<sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,<sup>42</sup> and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.<sup>43</sup> Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

<sup>44</sup> ‘The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.<sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ <sup>52</sup> And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’

Having sat in a pew for more than one week in your life, you have probably discovered that some preachers resonate with you better than others. To each preacher there is an audience who especially connects with his or her message style. That has been true throughout the ages. Luke focused on the first becoming last and the last becoming first. Matthew’s style was high drama, with a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness and the furnace of fire. Just as we respond differently to different preachers, it is not uncommon to respond differently to different gospel writers. I, myself, prefer Luke for his easy-to-understand parables and his messages; Matthew is a little more difficult for me to comprehend and his messages, on the surface, are difficult as well.

After all, two weeks ago I stood here and assured you that God gives all multiple chances to receive God’s love and hope and faith, which is good news for family, friends, and strangers who turn away from or deny God. Last week I referenced today’s reading from Romans: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So how does this reassurance, which I still trust to hold true, connect to the Son of Man sending his angels, who will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth? Remember, when I first began, I reminded you that any passage must be read in the context of the whole Bible. So let’s begin!

Our first challenging text actually comes out of the same aforementioned reassuring Romans passage. Paul says, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...” Wait right there. Our modern ears hear “predestined” and figure God has already decided some are in and some are out. What’s the use in trying if God has, to our minds, randomly chosen some of us, right? Fortunately, that’s not it at all. Hear again: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined.” This might be ringing some contextual Biblical bells. Jeremiah 1:5 captures God’s words to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.” In last week’s sermon I mentioned another part of Romans that reminds us that God is the one who knit us together in our mother’s womb so certainly God’s words to Jeremiah are words to us as well. Simply put, God foreknew each and every one of us and we have *all* been predestined to be conformed to the image of God’s Son. And so we move onward.

Matthew throws a number of parables about the kingdom of heaven our way. We’ll begin with the parable of the wheat and the weeds and the parable of the net of good and bad fish. In both, Jesus says, at the end of the age, the angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous and will collect all causes of sin and all evildoers and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. My goodness.

Pastor and theologian Elisabeth Johnson has looked at the other times and ways Matthew has used the word we translate as “causes of sin” to better understand who this group might be. She has found in every other occurrence that *skandalon* speaks more of something from within, not a whole person who is a cause of sin or an evildoer. She suggests, “Perhaps when Jesus says that the angels will collect all *skandala* to burn in the fire, he means that everything within us that causes sin will be burned away.”<sup>1</sup> Evil and good both reside in each of us. The furnace of fire then becomes something purifying rather than terrifying.

What about the parables about mustard and yeast, which we normally consider to be talking about how great the kingdom of heaven is in that it only takes a little bit of faith to make a big difference? We can still hold onto that understanding but there is more. We think this is simply a story about good things but nothing is so black and white, especially not when Jesus is speaking. There’s more to the stories of the mustard seed and the leaven, just as there is more to the story of any of our lives, all of which are far from black and white. In these parables, Jesus is challenging us to question our own thinking, our own judging. The mustard seed of which he speaks was perhaps one of the worst weeds around, seeds too small to sort from the good seed and a plant so large it blocks the sun from all around

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Johnson [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\\_date=7/17/2011](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=7/17/2011) 22 July 2011.

it, and yet the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a giant tree. The leaven, so commonly accepted among us who eat risen bread, was a problem at best for the baker of that era. Leaven would ruin the unleavened bread so necessary in Jewish ritual life and that very leaven, created from rotted bread, could cause grave illness and even death if not used at exactly the right time. And yet, the kingdom of heaven is like that little leaven.

The kingdom of heaven can be found in the most unexpected places. What we might consider bad, because of the teachings of our education or government or even churches, because of our own experiences, because of our modern context, because of any host of things, might really be the kingdom of heaven. Our views get corrupted in so many ways, and so Jesus challenges us to stop applying our understandings of good and evil upon the world around us. That is a job for God and God alone for only God sees the whole picture of one's life; God sees the evil and good within each of us.

This week one of you fine folks sent me an excellent retelling of Romans 8:31-34. Being part of our text this week, I thought I would share it with you.

After living what I felt was a "decent" life, my time on earth came to the end. The first thing I remember is sitting on a bench in the waiting room of what I thought to be a court house. The doors opened and I was instructed to come in and have a seat by the defense table. As I looked around I saw the prosecutor. He was a villainous looking gent who snarled as he stared at me. I sat down and looked to my left and there sat my attorney, a kind and gentle looking man. The corner door flew open and there appeared the judge in full flowing robes, commanding an awesome presence as he moved across the room. As he took his seat behind the bench, he said, "Let us begin." The prosecutor rose and said, "My name is Satan and I am here to show you why this man belongs in hell." He proceeded to tell of lies that I told, things that I stole, and in the past when I cheated others. Satan told of other horrible perversions that were once in my life and the more he spoke, the further down in my seat I sank. I was so embarrassed that I couldn't look at anyone, even my own attorney, as the Devil told of sins that even I had completely forgotten about. As upset as I was at Satan for telling all these things about me, I was equally upset at my attorney who sat there silently, not offering any form of defense at all. I know I had been guilty of those things, but I had done some good in my life - couldn't that at least equal out part of the harm I'd done? Satan finished with a fury and said, "This man belongs in hell, he is guilty of all that I have charged and there is not a person who can prove otherwise." When it was his turn, my attorney first asked if he might approach the bench. The judge allowed this over the strong objection of Satan, and beckoned him to come forward. As he got up and started walking, I was able to see him in his full splendor and majesty and I realized why he seemed so familiar. This was Jesus representing me, my Lord and my Savior. He stopped at the bench and softly said to the judge, "Hello, Father," and then he turned to address the court. "Satan was correct in saying that this man had sinned, I won't deny any of these allegations. And, yes, the wage of sin is death, and this man deserves to be punished." Jesus took a deep breath and turned to his father with outstretched arms and proclaimed, "However, I died on the cross so that this person might have eternal life and he has accepted me as his Savior, so he is mine." The judge then said, "This man is free. The penalty for him has already been paid in full. Case dismissed." As my Lord led me away, I could hear Satan ranting and raving, "I won't give up. I will win the next one." I asked Jesus as he gave me my instructions where to go next, "Have you ever lost a case?" Christ lovingly smiled and said, "Everyone that has come to me and asked me to represent them has received the same verdict as you: paid in full."

Evil and good exist together within each of us. God knows that and God sent God's Son so that we might share in his conquering death, despite the sin in us. In light of the very recent tragedy in Norway, it is easy to understand how the prime minister said of the event, "This is evil. This is pure evil."<sup>2</sup> And yet, yet, God knows how to find the good in even the perpetrator, for God created him good. I shared with you a couple of weeks ago a verse from 2 Peter and I was not going to lift it up again this week but a number of theologians tied it to our texts today so I felt it permissible. "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." As pastor Karen Chakoian has said, "God's plan is and has always been the redemption of creation; we will be restored into the image of God in which we were called into being and meant to live."<sup>3</sup> Just as Paul tells us, "For those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." Our vision is too short-sighted to truly see the good God sees, to truly see the image of God in each other, especially in those who cause great pain and suffering. Therefore, we cannot judge one another. So what do we do?

Pastor Kate Huey, in reflecting on the parable of the wheat in the context of tangible evil asks, "Is it possible that the mystery of the parable has something to do with God's timing, and our inability to judge or, for that matter, our unwillingness to trust in God's own judgment? God's judgment, of course, is always better for someone else than it is for us. Still, there is evil and wrongdoing, and surely we're supposed to do something. [Theologian Barbara Brown] Taylor says that, 'what the Boss seems to know is that the best and only real solution to evil is to bear good fruit. Our job, in a mixed field, is not to give ourselves to the enemy by devoting all our energy to the destruction of the weeds, but to mind our own business, so to speak - our business being the reconciliation of the world through the practice of unshielded love. If we will give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest...'"<sup>4</sup>

There is indeed and without a doubt evil in the world and, sadly, evil in each of us. When I first looked at these texts as sermon material in May, I thought the hard part would be figuring out who was the wheat and who was the weed. The truth is the hard part is even harder than I thought; the hard part is trusting God to be the judge, the hard part is focusing on ourselves instead of others. We cannot judge one another. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus reminds us why; he asks, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" The only one who can judge us, the one without sin, is the one who has already set us free. Do not focus your efforts on fixing others when your best self is meant to go about bearing good fruit. Surely we all have within us both weed and wheat. Be

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-rt-us-norway16e7in00c-20110723.0,1217623.story> 23 July 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 283.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Huey, <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/wheat-and-weeds-together.html> 22 July 2011.

confident in God's promise to cleanse the weeds from you and from me and from your neighbor at the end of age, leaving only wheat, leaving us to shine like the sun.

Let us pray: God of mercy, help us to remember that only you know us completely, all the good and all the bad. Keep our energies on bearing good fruit instead of judging those to whom only you have the right. We ask all these things through your Son who has died so we might have eternal life despite our flaws. Amen.