

The Enemy of the Good

I suspect most of us grew up thinking of Jesus as a carpenter in the years before he began his ministry, but do you know why? Why we think that? If you answered “because the Bible says so,” you’d be right. The Bible, specifically the Gospel of Mark, does say so, although it does so in only one verse, and that one verse is the only such mention in any of the four gospels. Even more interesting is the fact that in the comparable story in the Gospel of Matthew, a story that follows along with Mark’s account of the same incident in nearly every detail with the exception that in Matthew, it’s not Jesus who’s said to be a carpenter but his father Joseph. That’s the only verse in all the gospels where Joseph is called a carpenter. So who’s the carpenter? Was it Joseph, or was it Jesus?

Of course, it doesn’t really make any difference whether it was Joseph or Jesus, or even both, but the fact is there’s very little in the teachings of Jesus that would seem to suggest or reflect a background as a carpenter. I mean, if he were a carpenter, you would expect something of that experience to come through in his stories, but I’m hard pressed to think of any story that Jesus tells in any of the gospels that does so. On the other hand, there are a number of stories he tells that do sound like someone who’s had actual experience with farming, both with raising crops and also tending animals, specifically sheep. What is more, these stories seem to reflect the practical realities of farming, what it’s really like, as opposed to stories that sound like someone talking about farming in a way that doesn’t seem to reflect any real experience of actually having done it. The way I would talk about farming, for example.

Both last Sunday and today, we’ve heard stories Jesus tells about farming, specifically growing things. Last week, he talked about a farmer sowing seeds, i.e., scattering seeds, trusting that some at least will fall on fertile soil, but knowing full well that many will not. But that’s OK, Jesus suggests, because the yield from those seeds that do take root in good soil will more than make up for all the seeds that don’t grow because they fell on rocky soil or among weeds. It seems pretty clear that this story was intended to prepare his disciples for the job of spreading the gospel, preparing them for the reality that most of their efforts will fall on deaf ears, but assuring them that’s OK, because when someone does hear and respond to the gospel, that will more than make up for all the failures. It’s a very realistic view of both farming and preaching.

Today we heard another story about growing things, and it, too, is a very realistic story. A farmer sows a field in wheat, but when the plants come up, there are a number of weeds in the field among the wheat, which it’s more or less assumed must have been the work of an enemy. But when the field hands offer to go out into the field and pull up the weeds, the farmer stops them, warning them that by doing so they were likely to cause more harm to the wheat than the weeds would. Again, we have a very practical view of the reality of farming, that rather than try to extract the weeds in the middle of the growing season, they were much better off waiting till the harvest, when separating the wheat from the weeds would be relatively easy and do no harm at all to the wheat.

Again, it's not hard to imagine why Jesus would have told a story like this to his disciples in the process of preparing them to continue his work in the church long after he was gone. Because the fact is you can do your very best to cultivate a healthy and constructive mindset among the members of a church, but despite one's best efforts, there will always be someone, and maybe several someones, who don't agree with everyone else, maybe even anyone else. But if you try to weed out every source of dissension so as to achieve complete unanimity within the congregation, you're probably going to do more harm than you are good. Far better to learn to live with some limited measure of dissension, than try to achieve perfect agreement, which in this life is just not likely to occur, at least not for any length of time.

In that respect this parable is a very good illustration of the truth of one of the wisest sayings I've ever heard, and the best piece of advice I could give to anyone, particularly to clergy. I'm not sure where I first heard this, or from whom, and I doubt I fully understood it at the time, but for whatever reason, I remembered it and the older I get, the truer I think it is. The saying is this: the perfect is the enemy of the good. In the parable, the field hands want a perfect field, a field utterly without weeds. But in their desire to achieve perfection, they were about to do something that was going to cause more harm than just leaving well enough alone. Granted it wasn't going to be a perfect field, but it was a good field, unless of course they started trampling down the wheat in a zealous attempt to get every last weed and causing so much damage that it's not even a good field anymore. So the real enemy here is not the person who planted the weeds, but those whose desire for perfection was going to cause even more harm than the weeds. The desire here for perfection was indeed the enemy of the good.

Which, when you think about, is pretty close to a perfect description of the current state of American politics, as has been demonstrated yet again this past week in Washington. Surely it should have been possible by now for the Congress to agree upon measures to remedy at least some of the obvious flaws in the current health care system. But in the utter absence of any willingness to compromise, to accept a merely better system even if not an absolutely perfect system, the Congress once again proved itself unable to accomplish anything at all, other than arguably to have left us even worse off than we were before. Contrast the current mess with the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960's which was passed, and could only have been passed, with bipartisan majorities. Because of the opposition of southern Democrats, that legislation was possible only because many Republicans crossed the aisle to actively support it. That kind of cooperation would appear to be completely impossible today.

But far worse than the current state of affairs in the world of politics is the current state of affairs in the church, where very much that same perfectionist spirit that considers compromise a dirty word is doing enormous harm not merely to the church as an institution, but what is worse, much worse, to the very credibility of the gospel message itself, the gospel message that our actions in the church have held up to mockery, ridicule and contempt among increasing numbers of people in our society. Though certainly not alone, Presbyterians have been among the worst offenders in this regard, in the past hundred years having split numerous times over various issues that while certainly important, at least to someone, never touched on the core doctrines of the faith as traditionally understood, those being the doctrines of the Trinity and the fully human, fully divine natures of Jesus Christ.

But time after time, it hasn't been enough to agree on the true essentials. No, there had to be agreement on pretty close to everything, and just as you'd expect, there's always been something that someone had a problem with. For the most part, it has not been so much a case of trying to force people to believe something that they simply cannot believe, as much as it has been simply a case of not being willing to tolerate in our midst people who don't think exactly like we do. So instead of the church being a model for the world of how people can live together despite their differences, something that this world *desperately* needs, we're just another example of a group trying to achieve perfect unity by running off everyone who doesn't agree with them completely, something that this world doesn't need any more examples of. Frankly, if we can't do better than we have in this respect, then we don't deserve to be called the church of Jesus Christ.

That's what Paul is talking about in Romans, where he's writing to a congregation being torn apart by dissension, here largely between Jews and Gentiles, and just like everywhere else, both sides thought the answer to the problem was running off the others. Paul acknowledges here the difficulty of living with disagreement, because it involves a lot of compromises, and compromise is never easy for any of us. But surprisingly, Paul says that's the whole point. In an extraordinary statement that is far too often overlooked or even ignored, Paul says that God has intentionally subjected this world to just such futility and dissension—in effect, Paul is saying that God planted the weeds—so that we wouldn't look for perfection among the transient and fragile things of this world, but rather look to the things of the Spirit where perfection can and one day will be found, though not in this mortal existence. That is a true perfection for which now we can only hope. But the time will come when we will all live in perfect harmony, just as the Holy Trinity itself, but that time is not yet here, and so for now, we wait with patience, patience above all else with one another, even with those with whom we disagree. Because for now, the perfect is very much the enemy of the good.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*