



The garden of good and evil

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 2017.

If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Romans 8:25

Jesus uses illustrations in his preaching that are familiar. In this parable he uses the imagery of what is involved in growing a garden. You have to know the condition of the soil, choose the right placement and spacing for different kinds of plants, and give them their proper nurture. Inevitably, there are always going to be some bad growths among the good.

This parable teaches us that we live in the midst of a world of good and evil. We have to contend with the evil that exists along side of the good. No matter how hard we may try to sow the seeds of goodness and love, there are always going to be the forces of evil working against us. There are bad seeds sown among the good, mixing the worst elements among the better. What this teaches us is that we must not give into despair over the evil in God's good world. We have to learn to deal with dishonest people, scam artists, poor quality services, defective cars and appliances, computer hackers and viruses, the unpredictable stock market and obtuse employers, coworkers, neighbors and family members. Despite all this, there is still reason to hope.

In the creation story from Genesis, the Garden of Eden represents that state in which no evil exists and everyone is in perfect obedience to God. We were all born in that state of innocence until we learned right from wrong. When we willfully chose what we knew was wrong, we left that garden of innocence, never to return. It won't be until God's will is followed perfectly that we will recover a sense of innocence. In Persian mythology, paradise is referred to as the king's garden. There are no weeds in the garden of paradise.

Whenever I get to visit with my ten-month old granddaughter and see her photos posted on face book, she is a happy child, delighted in discovering every new thing in the world that we might take for granted. For now, all she knows is the love of her family. Her happiness and innocence is her personal spiritual Garden of Eden. As far as she knows, there is no such thing as evil, hatred and violence in her world. In time, she will have to learn about the weeds in her spiritual garden. She will have to learn that there is prejudice, crime and violence in the world.

New parents have an instinctive desire to shield their young children to preserve their innocence. They have to warn them to be aware of the reality of evil and those who engage in it. Growing children have to be equipped to live in the real world by giving them the right set of values. In time, they go to school and live and learn along side of other children of diverse backgrounds and values. Learning to live in a pluralistic society is a part of our education not found in the classroom or on the Internet.

Because children are so vulnerable, it is all the more important that we equip them with what is right and good at an early age. Because young minds are easily molded it is all the more important to give them the right values. They can be raised with prejudice and bigotry and

intolerance as easily as they can be taught to appreciate diversity, compassion and understanding. Children are like plants in a garden that need to be nurtured and cultivated with the right values in a healthy environment. Rather than asking why, what is more important is to accept the reality of the evil in God's good world. An essential part of the learning process is the ability to discern good from evil, honesty from dishonesty in the midst of a confusing and conflicting values and standards. In the age of relativism, it's not that simple.

The Donatists were 4th century schismatic Christians in North Africa who excluded those who did not meet their standard of religious purity and orthodoxy. Modern day Donatists appoint themselves guardians and arbiters of right doctrine based on their interpretation of the Scriptures. The church in the 21st century has experienced deep divisions brought about by those who presume to judge who knows the Lord and who does not, who is eligible for heaven and who is not. None of us appreciates being written off because of our belief. Neither should we presume to judge the worthiness of others. It is not our task to decide between saints and sinners. Only God can be the judge of that.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1) Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that real hope is not in what we can see, but in what we cannot see. (Romans 8:25) Well-founded hope enables us to have confidence in what we can't see. This is all the more important for those who bear the responsibility of teaching young minds about what is right and good and true.

If you attend school reunions, you know what it is like to learn what became of certain classmates that you knew. Those who showed little aptitude or promise sat in class along side of those who were very bright and motivated and showed great promise. In the end, it was what all of them did with what they had and how they took advantage of the opportunities that came their way that made the difference in how they turned out.

Those in business, trades and professions live and work along side of those who don't share the same values. The reality is that the world will never be completely rid of dishonesty, intolerance, prejudice and those who try to exploit us through manipulation and intimidation. We may wonder why God doesn't just reward the good and punish the evil, but it's not that simple. We have to live with the fact that bad things will happen to good people and that good things will come to those who don't deserve it. We can't expect God to rescue us every time we get into trouble. Our hope is in the conviction that no force of evil can ever overcome God's love for us and that justice will prevail.

Negative people who expect the worst to happen are at a greater risk of being overcome by the forces of defeat. By refusing to give in to despair, we go forward with the confidence that no temptation can overpower us unless we allow it and no one can demean us unless we allow them. The basis of making moral and ethical decisions is not always that clear and we have to rely on the power of God's love to discern truth from falsehood, right from wrong. In the end, we all have to learn to live with the imperfect until God's perfection is realized in us.