

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Problem of Theodicy”

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George Bernard Shaw once told this interesting story. He said, “A Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner: ‘Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.’ When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, ‘The one I feed the most.’” Isn’t that the truth?

This weekend the Church reflects on Jesus’ parable of the weeds and the wheat. In a sense, it is Jesus’ answer to why there is evil in the world. Somehow mysteriously evil is allowed to exist so that good can come of it. Because we are not God, we don’t have access to every reason why the world is the way it is, however, we know that if God is truly God...God always wins.

This idea has sparked many interesting conversations in the history of Christian thought. The problem of weeds and wheat growing together is an example of what theologians and philosophers have called “theodicy” which is essentially an argument that vindicates God’s goodness in the face of the evil we see in the world. And, this question clearly isn’t new as we can see it in both our first reading and our Gospel reading this weekend. Most of the time, the argument that is used for why there is evil in the world is that God gave us free will to either choose to love God and neighbor or to embrace the opposite. Love to be love cannot be coerced and so, because of sin, evil exists in our world. It is a very good argument. Most of us know in our hearts that this is true.

Jesus however is also suggesting even something more profound. Once weeds are introduced into the wheat, the weeds sometimes have a way of coexisting with the wheat for a very long time, sometimes as long as we live. Which is to say, once evil has been given the opportunity to take plant in our lives, it becomes very, very difficult to uproot it. And, not to bow too deeply to popular culture here, the difficulty we have of trying to uproot something unhealthy or sinful in our lives once it has already taken root reminds me of what Yoda shared with Luke in the Empire Strikes Back, “Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny”. I consider that pretty profound stuff wouldn’t you say? Not bad for a Muppet.

However, back to our question of theodicy, of how God can allow evil in the first place if he is indeed all good? It seems that the author of Wisdom also takes the side that God allows evil so that good can mysteriously come from it. He says as a prayer to God, “Though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us; for power, whenever you will, attends you...you gave your children good ground for hope that you would permit repentance for their sins.” In other words, it is precisely because God is all powerful that he can transform our very sins into the means for our salvation.

We also know this to be true. The crucifix in our sanctuary stands witness to that. However, if we are honest with ourselves, how often has God been able to take the sins of our past and let these failings become the fertilizer for the grace he had in store for us in the future? As a priest, I have seen this a number of times with young people whose first major relationship ends up in colossal failure because of bad decision making. However, the lessons learned from those failings became the very means for which God was able to prepare him or her for the person he had in mind for them from the beginning. Do you follow me? In this sense, it is a very good thing that the Master Gardener allows the weeds inside of us to sometimes intermingle with the wheat so that greater good can come from it.

Having said all that, it is also important to remind ourselves that, although God can transform even the weeds inside of us into a source for our salvation, we are nevertheless also reminded that this transformation can only come about through personal conversion. Which is to say, when it comes to the weeds and wheat inside of us, we need to be very careful about which one we are feeding in our soul day in and day out. Are we feeding the weeds in our soul that are choking off the wheat or are we nourishing the wheat inside of us, keeping the weeds at bay?

This is why George Bernard Shaw's story about the wisdom of the Native American is quite compelling to me. Sometimes, inside of all of us are two dogs, one good and one bad. Which one will win over us in the end? The one we feed the most. Or as Robert Louis Stevenson said, "In each of us, two natures are at war – the good and the evil. All our lives the fight goes on between them, and one of them must conquer. But in our own hands lies the power to choose – what we want most to be we are."