

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Stefanie Taylor

Gospel Reading: Romans 8:12-25

23 July, 2017



Today's gospel has a lot packed into it. There are three really big ideas here that I think merit a close look. The first big idea is the idea of God as an anthropomorphized image. Is it helpful to think of the God that we believe in, who is bigger and vaster than the universe, as a human being like us? Does that maybe limit this limitless God we have come to know? Second, who and what is Satan? Is Satan anthropomorphized too? Does Satan have control over us and we don't even know it? Lastly, is it helpful to think in these dualistic terms that are presented in today's gospel: good vs. bad? Have we not learned that nothing fits into such tidy, concrete boxes?

I don't know that we can unpack all three of these big ideas in one sermon but I do that was probably the point of him telling it this way. How does God explain ideas that are beyond our knowing and that encompass lessons that we might need several times in our lives, except to tell us something that makes us think about it over and over again. Perhaps he told this story just so that the only way we could grasp the meaning is if we were reading it at a time when something in our lives caused us to recognize the truth buried within at the time that we needed to hear it.

So maybe the way to approach today's gospel is to find the truth underneath all the dualistic, problematic imagery. And the only way I know how to do that is to find this story in the story of my own life.

When I was eleven I could run a sub six-minute mile. I was immediately put in the Junior Olympics and ran competitively for the next seven years. At one point I was ranked 8th in the nation and there was a lot of pressure on me to perform. There was also a lot of attention given to my body. I had big legs because I was a runner and some of the boys at my school started calling me "thunder thighs." I started to slow down a little after hitting puberty and I was convinced it was because I was fat. I told my parents I was now a vegetarian and had to prepare my own meals. They had three other kids and didn't mind giving that responsibility to me. So I prepared myself lettuce with mustard or applesauce with raisins. Occasionally I let myself have Ramen. When I got to college, I wanted to eat normally in front of people since we ate together all the time. I decided I would eat what everyone else ate from time to time and then I would excuse myself and get rid of it in the bathroom.

I knew about eating disorders but didn't believe I had one. I thought you had to be skinny to have an eating disorder and in my head, I wasn't skinny. Somebody caught me getting rid of my food one day and told me to tell my mom. He kept on me about telling my mom for months until one day I decided to just tell her and I honestly thought she would tell me that I probably shouldn't do that but that I was fine. But instead she completely freaked out and made me go see a therapist. After a couple months the therapist thought I was at the point of possibly dying and she asked me to go into treatment. I told her no and so she arranged an intervention. I still thought nothing was wrong with me.

During the intervention, my therapist said, you can either go the treatment center or you can die. Which would you choose? And I said, "I'd rather die." To my complete surprise, my youngest brother, a super athlete who's too cool for school immediately burst into tears. It was at that point that I realized something was wrong with me.

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A united Church of Christ pastor, Talitah Arnold once said, "There is not a person in our congregations who does not know what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel. Sometimes our own lives resemble the farmer's infested field, with weeds and wheat intertwined in our souls, hearts, and minds. The apostle Paul certainly knows it: I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And this was certainly a time in my life when I can recognize the field in today's story. I didn't want to starve myself, to exercise all the time, to fixate on my body. Yet I did and I couldn't stop it.

So there I was, my junior year of college, with the field of my life in complete disarray, facing leaving school and going to the middle of nowhere in Wisconsin to battle the demons in my life. I don't know if my eating disorder was given to me by Satan or if it was the result of my own sin or if it was something else. But I do know, it was all mine to transform. I was not sure I could do it and more than once, I begged God to just take it from me, just as the slaves in today's gospel asked the good sower if they should go in and take the weeds. But like the story, God didn't take it from me. And twelve years later, I can say that I'm glad he didn't. I'm glad I was forced to fight my own demons, to look into the depth of my being and shine light in places I was afraid to look. I'm glad God didn't destroy who I am today by saving me from that time in my life. Because I learned a great deal about how strong I am. I also learned a great deal about how loved I am. I also learned a lot about how much other people suffer and I will always remember the women who fought the demons with me out there in the woods of Wisconsin.

The best lesson I learned was that God was there the whole time. I must admit that starving myself and constantly being fixated on food and my body kept me from seeing God in the world. It kept me from seeing a lot in life and this made me feel very alone. It also made me feel very ashamed. But in today's gospel I hear God saying, I see those weeds, don't you dare take them out. They are part of you and it is you that I love: all of you. Today's gospel echoes what I learned in Wisconsin: God was there the whole time, not trying to change, me but trying to love me and that love, once recognized, transformed the weeds in my life.

Today's gospel is telling us that the weeds cannot be torn out, they must be transformed. And transformation is a process that requires constant love and attention. But we're not alone on this journey, as the demons in our lives might have us believe. The whole host of heaven is with us.

I'm glad this story I told you is part of my story but I'm also glad it's not my only story. My husband and I were talking and he reminded me that we're all bigger than the sum of all our parts. Perhaps God is telling us today that we're bigger than the weeds in our lives, no matter what those weeds are, we're still bigger than them. And maybe God is calling us to see how big we are and to shine like the sun in the Kingdom of our God.

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