

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is week two of the lectionary's three-week coverage of Romans chapter 8, and I committed last week to focusing on this chapter in my sermon for these three weeks because this is such a rich and well-loved chapter that it deserves our attention. And events in the news have made today's section of this chapter particularly relevant. This part of chapter 8 is where Paul talks about creation being "subject to futility" and "enslaved to decay," waiting with eager longing to be relieved of its suffering, groaning as though in labor. And right now Canadian forests are burning, thanks to the drier than usual weather that comes with the increase in average temperature in recent history. And the smoke from those fires is being pushed by the prevailing winds into the United States. We were spared the smoke here in Champaign, but not by much. Chicago was hit hard. On Thursday it apparently experienced its worst air quality in recorded history, and it was joined on Friday by Minneapolis and Detroit as some of the most polluted major cities in the world, and then by New York and D.C. a day later. And that's not the only natural crisis we're dealing with these days. We've also seen an unusual number of tornadoes this year. Scientists say Oklahoma's famous "tornado alley" might be moving our way, into Missouri and Illinois. Effingham and Charleston were both hit by tornadoes on the same night a month ago, doing some significant damage. Creation really does seem to be suffering from the effects of human-induced climate change and other ecological crises, and it seems to be letting us know.

Paul's point is that the sin we are afflicted with is not merely a private religious matter. It is not only about the personal struggle he described in depth two weeks ago in chapter seven of not being able to do the good that he wanted to do but instead doing the bad he didn't want. And the consequences of sin are not limited either to our relationships with our fellow human beings, which is likely the first place you went last week when I asked you to ponder for a few moments the mess that we are in. Sin turns out to be even bigger than that. It has infected the whole creation because of us. It manifests as the consequences of our focusing on ourselves, on our own wants and needs, without regard to the damage caused to others or the world around us. It shows up when we use the resources nature provides in ways that are not only wasteful and unsustainable, but also, ironically, destructive. Now it would be one thing if we each bore the consequences of our individual sin alone. Then we might rightly pontificate about "reaping what you sow." But the world doesn't work that way. It's messier and more complicated than that. It's set up so that when one sows it's often another who reaps, and not always in a good way.

That imagery, of course, gets us into our Gospel reading this morning – more agricultural imagery from Matthew 13. If you're older than me, and a few of you are, you might have grown up calling this the parable of "the wheat and the tares" from the King James Version of the Bible. Our translation has "weeds" in place of "tares" because nobody knows what a tare is. But if you're a gardener, even a not-very-good gardener like me, this parable can seem ridiculous if you think about applying it to your own gardening or lawn care. I have been in a continual battle with thistles in our yard and garden. A few years ago we let some thistles grow up in a big patch of mint outside our back window where we also have bird feeders because we noticed that the birds loved the thistle seeds. Unfortunately, they didn't eat all of those seeds, and that area of the yard is exactly where we have the worst problem now. If I didn't get out there and dig them out, they would take over. But we also have a little vegetable bed in a different part of the yard, and a couple of weeks ago we found that a vine had grown up and wrapped itself around a good portion of one of our tomato plants. I'm pretty sure that if we let it continue to grow together with the tomato plant, per the instructions of

the householder in the parable, we would end up with a stunted harvest on that plant. So, we went in and cut it out. It was not a simple task because it was really wound around the tomato plant, but it was easy to tell what was what. And we were able to get it both disentangled and uprooted, and we did not pull up the tomato plant in the process. I would advise not using Jesus' parables as gardening tips, because that's not what they're for.

But here's what we miss in a casual reading of this text in our modern translation. The weeds here in this parable are a specific kind of weed that appeared in wheat fields, a plant now called darnel. The tares of the King James Bible are exactly that plant. Darnel was a weed that was poisonous to both humans and animals who ate it, but it also looked very much like wheat. So, attempting to weed it out while it is growing in a wheat field could indeed result in pulling up some good wheat plants as well. Darnel is not a problem anymore where modern farming methods are practiced, but it's still a thing in parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia where more traditional farming happens.

In his explanation of the parable, Jesus explicitly connects the wheat with the "children of the kingdom," and the weeds, the darnel plants, he says are children of the evil one, planted by the devil. This parable is a recognition that at the present time, the time that we live in, good and evil are mixed together, and it's not always easy to know which is which. It also recognized our tendency to want to sort good people from bad people right now, and effectively says that we're not really equipped to do that. And when we do, we end up hurting children of the kingdom. But is that all that is going on here? Does the text mean to say that there really are good people and bad people, that they are good or bad right now, and there's nothing we can do to change that? Does it reinforce the doctrine of double predestination that Lutherans reject, that some are predestined to salvation and others to damnation? I am skeptical. And there is evidence right here in the text that argues against that interpretation. When the angels come to do the sorting of the harvest at the end of the age, Jesus says that they will collect not just the evildoers, but also "all causes of sin" and remove them from the kingdom. So, it's more complicated than just good and bad people. Apparently, there are still ways for good people to be corrupted. Are there also, maybe, ways for "bad people" to improve? We need to be clear that this text doesn't go there explicitly. But it opens the door. And Lutheran theology has walked through that door, partly with the help of Paul's dilemma in Romans seven. We recognize that in the current age even we who have been claimed as children of the kingdom by our baptism are also simultaneously still sinners. We are fully both sinners and saints at the same time. Or, to put it another way, we are both wheat and tares, both the good crop and the poisonous look alike. And so weeding the garden cannot be our task. It's above our pay grade, and beyond our capabilities. Who will save us then from this impossible dilemma? That was Paul's anguished question two weeks ago. And the answer was God in Jesus Christ, who shows up in the Spirit working in us now to begin separating us from our sinfulness.

The good news for the mess that we are in, which is good news not only for us, but for all the rest of the field we find ourselves in, is what Paul is articulating back in our Romans reading, and what we are also given to share. But the good news is even better than that. In dealing with our sin through Jesus' death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit as the animating force in our lives, God also means to save God's good creation from the consequences of our sinfulness. And we can play a part in that. We can use our God-given gifts to identify, mitigate, and even reverse the destructive consequences of our self-centered lifestyle, confident that as our hearts are opened to one another and to the world God loves by the work of the Spirit, we are working alongside God's greater work of saving and redeeming all of creation along with us. May we trust that vision and that promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.