

“Groaning, Waiting, Hoping”

Romans 8:14-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 19, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might trust in you, despite our trials, and find hope in your promises. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Every once in a while, when Jesus tells a story, it becomes painfully clear that he was brought up by a carpenter, not a farmer. “However did these weeds get here?” asked no farm hand ever. “Oh, someone must have come over while we were sleeping and planted them,” said no farmer ever. As an explanation for why there is evil in the world, the idea that the devil sowed it while we were sleeping might be more satisfying than saying it blew in on the wind, but it doesn’t reflect a very good understanding of weeds.

If we can lay aside the imperfect nature of the metaphor, however, there is a comforting lesson for these strange times to be found in this parable. Have you noticed that we’ve been doing a lot of waiting lately? Waiting for the numbers to get better, waiting for things to open up again, waiting to be able to safely gather for worship again, waiting for news of an effective vaccine. I’m guessing back at New Year’s, none of you were hoping that 2020 would be one long lesson in practicing patience, but here we are. Both of our scripture passages today touch on waiting, though from different perspectives. It may be that Paul’s description feels more apt: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and

not only the creation, but we ourselves.” Raise your hand if you’ve had your fill of legitimate opportunities for groaning recently. It’s not that groaning makes the waiting easier. And some folks might argue it makes it harder. It’s just that sometimes groaning is what happens, when we’ve been stuck in waiting mode longer than we expected.

It’s important to remember that the early Christians Paul was writing to were also stuck in waiting mode way longer than they thought they would be. Paul could say that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” because he really did believe it was “about to be revealed”. But that’s not quite how Jesus came at it. Jesus didn’t dismiss our suffering by trying to convince us it was nothing compared with the awesomeness arriving later; Jesus suffered alongside us. But both Jesus and Paul, in the end, are pointing in the same direction – toward hope.

The “sufferings of this present time” certainly seem to have plenty of weeds the devil might have sown. They may be in our communities, our families, even within our own hearts. They may be in the comments section on the newspaper website or Facebook. They may be at the grocery store, or the local gym, or state houses across the country. And we may be very eager to get in there and weed every last one of them out. Certainly, there is mandate in our scriptures for speaking up and acting out to dismantle the sources of injustice in our society. Clearly, the gospel is a call to bring good news to the poor and freedom for the captives.

But there is comfort in knowing that, in the end, it isn't up to us to rid the world of evil. We can be about God's business, channeling the power of love to transform systems of oppression into structures that equitably nurture all God's children. We can practice our faith in ways that help build up the kingdom of heaven, keeping the weeds of evil from taking root. We can join with those lamenting "the sufferings of our present time," weeping with those who weep and comforting those who mourn. We can strain and groan as we struggle to give birth to new ways of living together as neighbors and friends. But in the end, it is a relief to have Jesus remind us that it is God who will rid the world of evil. It is God who can justly judge which weed is really a wildflower and which wheat has rotted in the field. It is God who can and will adopt and redeem us from the sufferings we're going through.

As we groan and wait, it is because we are children of God that we can also hope. We are heirs to a promise. "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." Do we? I know that every time we talk about the fruit of the Spirit, the one most people will claim to have trouble growing is patience. What if we misunderstand patience? This line about waiting with patience is just a few short verses away from where Paul had us "groaning in labor pains". What if patience can include the groaning? What if we've set the standards for piety too high, and what we really need is to cut ourselves some slack and get our groan on? What if the Bible is giving us permission to understand patience and hope as fully inclusive of groaning?

That would be a gospel more reflective of the Jesus who cried out from the cross, asking why God had forsaken him. What if groaning is like being able to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds? When we groan, it's because we are joining in with God's sorrow that the world is not as it should be. To know this and name this is itself a sign of hope, because it proves we have not yet acquiesced to evil. We have not given up on the world becoming better than it currently is. We have not abandoned the promise. Our seeming impatience itself is a sign of hope, because it's a measure of our passion for God's vision of shalom for all creation.

There is a lot of noise out there implying you're probably doing pandemic wrong. And we're all exhausted, so it's highly likely most of us are making mistakes on a daily basis. There is so much that is broken, some of which we can help with, but much of which we are utterly helpless to change. What we can try to do, however we can – each of us in our own weedy wheat fields – is live as people of hope, children of God and heirs of the promise. We can groan with those who groan, and wait with those who wait, and hope for what we do not see, if only to remind ourselves that the horrors we do see shall also pass. Hallelujah and Amen!