

Ordinary A 16 July 19, 2026 Greenwich

“His angels will collect out of His Kingdom all who cause others to sin, and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

No surprise that there are evil doers in the world. After all, scripture’s first family, Adam and Eve, bore Cain, a murderer.

But, for the early Church, the issue of evil in its own midst was more pointed and perplexing. Apparently, some members of Matthew’s church were faithful disciples, while others perhaps were sabotaging the Gospel message.

So, Matthew puts on the lips of Jesus an explanation of both the cause of evil in their midst and the response the Church must make.

The cause: Jesus says an enemy has done this. Matthew expands this: the Devil has come into the church and perverted some members.

So, should the Church expel the evil members now, or wait and endure them?

Jesus counsels patience.

Weeds often resemble wheat. It can be difficult to distinguish the pious from the pious fraud.

When we are honest, we know that we are not wise enough to know who can be redeemed, who is hopelessly in the clutches of the Evil One, and who is obviously saved.

All that will be made clear at the harvest, the Day of Judgment.

In the original version of the parable, Jesus then merely says, “Collect the weeds for burning, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

But Matthew has added a twist, something for the put-upon faithful to relish. “His angels will collect all who cause others to sin, and all evil doers, and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” Yay us!

But is that what Jesus himself would relish?

Rabbi Jesus had chosen as a disciple one whom the Devil seduced into betraying him.

Could now the Crucified and Risen Lord celebrate anyone of His, even a Judas, being cast into a fiery furnace?

Could the Crucified and Risen One,
who prayed, “Father, forgive them,”
who bestowed upon the other sinful and unfaithful disciples
Easter “Shalom,”

who refused legions of angels to strike down His
persecutors and rescue Him from His Passion,

could such a Savior then blithely dispatch those same
angels to cast into hell all the evil doers? Any evildoers?

I cannot claim to know the mind of God about the eternal salvation of anyone, myself included. I do believe, instead, as Father Richard Rohr says, faith means we seek understanding, not certainty.

God's unfathomable mercy can sound unfair, unjust---the same way it seems unjust that the workers get paid equal wages, whether they labored in the vineyard all day or just the final hour.

And that's the kind of reflection parables are meant to provoke: What are the values of the Kingdom? And are they our values as well?

Jesus uses parables to invite his hearers deeper into the mystery of God's reign, and into the conversion the Reign of God demands.

He doesn't immediately supply answers to the unsettling questions, but rather He provokes us into examining our immature, incomplete or even false pictures of what God is like.

His parables seek to draw us closer to the Kingdom and to the One who tells these parables, so that we may begin to see the world, ourselves and one another through His eyes.

Today's parable highlights the tension: the reign of God is already “at hand,” present and operative----it has seized the hearts and imaginations of believers and transformed them into disciples---but the Kingdom is still “not yet,” since its final fulfillment will be cosmic in scope, at the end of the age, at the harvest time.

Until that great day of the Lord, the Kingdom of God will contain both good and bad, since it admits all comers, and thus it will impose on faithful disciples the obligation to forgive and to love, even the sinner, just the way Jesus does.

For finally, Jesus Himself is the Parable of God.

As His final parable, Jesus does not tell another story; He enacts it. He enfleshes it. He kneels to wash feet, gives over His body to be broken and His blood to be poured out, embraces even death on a cross, all out of faithful love for His Father and for His flock.

And He commands his disciples: “As I have done this for you, you should also do. Do this---serve and forgive and love----do all this in memory of Me.”

Many “listen and listen but do not hear, look and look but do not see.”

But “blessed are our ears, blessed are our eyes.”

To us the gift has been given. And that gift of discipleship also demands both an alert readiness to the inbreaking of the Reign of God, as well as a faithful patience, precisely since it comes about not so much by our efforts as by the sheer grace of the Father.

We who are faithful are called simply to remain faithful until that day, and to let God make the decisions about any limits on divine forgiveness.

Impatience with sinfulness, our own or that of others, renders us defensive and defeated.

Instead, Alexander Solzhenitsyn counsels modesty:

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.

“But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

“During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil, and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish.

“One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.

“Socrates taught us: know thyself.

“Confronted by the pit into which we are about to toss those who have done us harm, we halt, stricken dumb: it is, after all, only because of the way things worked out, that they were the executioners and we weren't.”

Or maybe, if Solzhenitsyn is too dense, perhaps we can remember the insight of A. A. Milne: “Weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them”

R.S. Thomas, In his poem. *The Kingdom.*, reminds us:

It's a long way off but inside it
 There are quite different things going on:
 Festivals at which the poor man
 Is king and the consumptive is
 Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
 At themselves and love looks at them
 Back; and industry is for mending
 The bent bones and the minds fractured
 By life. It's a long way off, but to get
 There takes no time and admission
 Is free, if you purge yourself
 Of desire, and present yourself with
 Your need only and the simple offering
 Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Yes, the Evil One can be at work in our midst but perhaps thrives most when we begin deciding who is or is not a good and faithful Christian. God has never asked us for our advice in deciding the salvation of anyone else.

Instead, we rejoice that by the grace of God, we have been summoned to repent and believe the good news that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

We beg the Master of the harvest to make of us good soil in which the Word of God can bear abundant fruit.

Here, we present ourselves “with our need only and the simple offering of our faith, green as a leaf” and we allow the Lord to bind us ever more closely to himself in this Eucharist.

Thus, we will become more visibly and fully the Body of Christ, broken and poured out for the life of the world.

And the people of God said. Amen.