

Hopeful Endings

Recently, the abduction and disappearance of 19-year-old, Linda Stoltzfus, in Pennsylvania, has been on my mind. On Sunday, June 21st, she was walking home from church, from worshipping the Lord, when she was taken and likely harmed. Apparently, some of her underwear was found buried behind a local warehouse.

This story is yet another reminder that God is more patient with evil in this world than I would be. It seems it is the will of the Lord for good and evil to live side by side amidst everyday life, or such hurtful behavior would not be part of this world. If I were Linda's father, I would be asking God how he could allow this.

Jesus addresses this very issue in our Gospel reading today from Matthew 13. He tells a parable about wheat and weeds. In this story, a farmer plants wheat in his field, but overnight an enemy comes and also plants weeds, right alongside the wheat. So, the farmer's workers ask him if they should pull the weeds.

The answer is unexpected. The farmer tells his workers to allow the weeds to grow side by side with the wheat. He does not want them to pull the weeds in case the wheat might be pulled as well. Then, he says, "At the end of the growing season, collect the weeds first and burn them, and gather the wheat into my barn."

Jesus is saying that at least for now, God allows evil to live right alongside good. God allows evil to live right alongside his children. God allows evil to live right alongside you and me, which sometimes means trouble and hardship for us, like the abduction of a 19-year-old woman walking home from church.

Let me make this more personal. In 1989, 11-year-old boy, Jacob Wetterling, was abducted and hurt near St. Joseph, Minnesota, and subsequently murdered. My children, Erin and Michael, were born shortly after, in 1990 and 1994. The high-profile nature of Jacob's abduction made me hyper aware of evil in this world.

So, my children never walked to school. My awareness of evil living alongside my two precious children, motivated me as a parent, to drive my children to and from school until graduation. I remember requests from West School to let students walk to school because of high traffic near the school building. I politely declined.

In truth, good and evil living side by side is simply the reality God has given us. Jesus reminds us of this in today's story. This means God sees evil in the world, and knows his followers, including you and me, must figure out how to live safely and faithfully alongside it. I would like to say three things about this.

First, let's appreciate the patience of God. Sure, God's patience with the presence of evil in this world side by side with us is irritating at times, especially when we or people we love are harmed by it. However, we would do well to remember, sinful as we are, that God is equally and probably even more patient with us.

In other words, God's patience is actually good. For example, when we are sinful, when our hearts stray from the Lord, when we have doubts about God in the midst of hardship, God is generously patient with us. God does not give up on us when we are wrong, but lovingly calls us back into relationship with him.

As Psalm 103:8 says, "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." This means that whenever we are behaving more like a weed, rather than a beloved child of God, the Lord is waiting for us, even calling for us, to return to him. So, let's appreciate the patience of God.

Let us also be more patient with each other. The human tendency is to give up on those who we feel are wrong or evil in the world. We judge their behavior and dismiss them as sinners. Yet, if God is patient with a world full of evil, and if God is also patient with us, then perhaps we can be more patient with each other.

Second, we are not alone or helpless as we live alongside evil. One of the most important verses for me, as I have faced hard times in my life, or even as I have faced what really feels like evil, is Isaiah 41:13: "For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'"

In other words, even though evil is living alongside you in the world, the Lord God is standing alongside you too. He is right at your side, even holding your hand, and leading you through whatever hardship or evil you face. It is his presence with you that enables you to face what is evil in the world and be unafraid.

With such support from God, we can tell evil to move away from us, to leave us alone. With such support from God, we can stand alongside people we care about, and tell evil to move away from them, to leave them alone. Indeed, we are not alone or helpless as we live side by side with evil. God stands with us.

So, let us also stand with each other. If we know someone who is grieving a loved one's death, or someone who has been diagnosed with cancer, or someone who is being treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, then as God supports and stands with us, let us also support, stand with, care for, and love them.

Third, there is a hopeful ending to this story Jesus tells us today. This is, of course, the eventual triumph of God and good over evil. Evil is no way victorious over the Lord or the children of God. In fact, while the reign of God in this world includes living side by side with evil, the future reign of God excludes evil altogether.

In other words, those weeds, that which is evil in the world, will be burned and thrown away. It will be defeated and gone forever. As we read about in Revelation 21:4, "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Consequently, with evil gone forever, the wheat, what is good about the world, the children of God, that includes us, are saved. This story Jesus tells us today ends with our salvation. It is the hopeful and I mean also to say happy ending, we all crave most, as we live out life side by side with evil in the world.

You have heard me say before that evil can hurt us. Somedays, like the days Linda Stoltzfus and Jacob Wetterling were abducted and harmed, it really hurts us. But evil can never hope to have us. God has determined through Jesus and his cross, to put an end to evil, and to give us a hopeful and heavenly future.

I am not saying it's easy to wait for this day. We see a world now struggling with a novel virus, our nation struggling with issues of racism, ourselves and people we love struggling with personal problems, which can be physical, emotional, or spiritual, and we wonder if this hopeful ending can come soon enough.

Well, remember that God has not left us alone as we endure the presence of evil in the world. In fact, God knows just how difficult it is to lead faithful lives amidst the horrible situations we often face, and so like the good farmer who consistently tends to his wheat, God also lovingly tends to and cares for us every day.

So, stay close to the Lord through prayer, worship, and reading his Word in the Bible. See that God is close to you today and every day, even as you are side by side with evil. And if you are really struggling with your life, trust that God will soon, God will very soon, help you, and save you in every possible way.

Amen.