
Long Division

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 20, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Craig Kocher

Peter Storey, great friend of this chapel, and bishop in the Methodist church of South Africa describes the human condition this way: We are addicted to division. This addiction does not enter from beyond us, but rather the seeds of this addiction seem to be sown into the expansive fields of our very DNA. We are addicted to division. And this isn't just any old division, this is a long division, and the roots of this long division dig down deep.

The addiction rages like a flood swollen river through the story of the Old and New Testaments. No sooner has God created human kind and gifted us with the wonders of creation and the joys of love and friendship and community, does the addiction rise to the surface like a trout for a fly. Adam and Eve start pointing fingers, drawing lines, casting blame: "she's the weed, I'm the wheat, no, it's his fault; he is the weed, not me."

And the story continues. Two brothers are born and one rises up against the other. More families come into being, and with them more strife and chaos, hurt and confusion and the addiction is fueled. We heard that glorious passage of Jacob's ladder this morning. Jacob is alone in this passage, a hopeful vision comes his way. Yet, why is he alone? Because he couldn't get along with Esau. Only pages in and we have already become junkies, and by the time the story ends so high are we on the drug, like we modern day coffee-holics with our immunity to caffeine, we don't realize how far down the destructive drug has seeped into our souls and the structures of human life, though we feel and see its effects all around us.

Our political and cultural lives are full of anger and rancor, one side pointing fingers at the other, people yelling at and past one another. The wider world is so painfully filled with division. The profound sadness of the Arab-Israeli crisis. The overwhelming heartache of the humanitarian disaster along the US/Mexico border. The terrifying events involving Russia and Ukraine, and so many more. Our churches bicker and divide, one side taking the moral high ground over another. Hidden hurts lay dormant and new wounds bleed, inflicted within our most intimate relationships. And always, always the assumption: I am right and you are wrong. I belong in this field and you do not. I am wheat and you are a weed.

Enter Mathew's gospel and this morning's parable. Jesus, as he is prone to do, tries to work a little intervention on us addicts, and thus holds up this story as a mirror in the hopes that we might recognize ourselves as the prime actors, the plants in the field, rather than the farmer.

Our lives and world are filled with great moral urgency and great moral ambiguity. The parable says quite clearly there is good, and there is evil. There is wheat and there are weeds. The problem, however, is so often we simply cannot tell the difference. And very often, when we believe we are doing good, when we have a handful of wheat ready to harvest, we discover that we do not in fact have wheat but weeds. And when we think we have located the weeds we discover to our horror, we are about to uproot the wheat.

Look, I know what it's like to live as a weed in a field of wheat. After all, I served at Duke Chapel for six glorious years, and I'm a Carolina grad! Now that I know longer work for you people I can finally come out of the closet. I love the Tar Heels! I'm a weed in a field of wheat! Don't root me out. Let me come back. I love this place, too.

"Don't make it worse," my mother would say, when the little thread holding my jacket button in place would begin to unravel and I would try to tie it up. "Don't make it worse," my father said before my chewed up fingernail would turn into a painful hangnail. "Do no harm," was the first rule John Wesley gave before he sent his preachers out to proclaim the Gospel. "I will do no harm," the young physician says in the Hippocratic oath, before a scalpel is set in her hand.

A clergy friend tells a story about taking a group of youth to do home repair for the rural poor in the rolling foothills of the Appalachians. The family they were working with had a damaged and leaking roof and the youth were there to help fix the roof. While working on the roof, several of them noticed a busted fence, and since there were chickens to watch after, and perhaps the occasional fox to keep out, with great energy they decided to mend the fence as well. No problem. Easy fix. With gusto they began digging the hole for the first fence post when water began shooting skyward. They had struck the water line. Now the poor family had no roof, no fence, and no water. The old man of the house came walked out, witnessed all the destruction, and simply said, "Well, this isn't quite how I thought it would go."

It's not that our motives are bad our motives are usually good. We are trying to do right, wanting to make the world a better place. Sometimes, when we are sure that we've got a fistful of weeds, and we're ready to rip them out, what we've really got is a fistful of wheat, and our efforts threaten the whole crop. Even when we know there is a problem in our lives or in the world, there is no easy way to fix it.

The parable mirror tells us our addiction to division is not only on the outside, the division is on the inside. The world is fragmented, yes, but so are we, splintered internally, addicted to a division of the self within our very hearts, minds, souls, and imaginations. No wonder we cannot seem to do the right thing.

I'll regularly have conversations with students who in a moment of noble clarity and honesty will say: deep down, I am so confused. I seem to be one person in class, another on Friday night, another on Sunday morning, yet another when I'm at home with my folks, a further self appears on social media. I am a house divided, and I have no idea who I really am. My guess is most of us feel that way at least some of the time, so masterful have we become at projecting calculated images that we have lost our true selves.

My sense is the healing of the divisions on the outside are forever linked to the healing of the divided self on the inside, and all of the healing is nourished by the subtle work of God's healing grace in Christ. Often in these conversations with students I'll grab a book off my bookshelf and thrust it into their hands. "Read this," I'll say, "it's a story about a guy named Paul Farmer who was once just like you." Farmer was an undergraduate at Duke University, a tortured soul who didn't quite fit in and wasn't sure who he really was or where his place might be in the world. He fell in with the Catholic campus ministry here at Duke Chapel and heard something he had never heard before: God cares about those who no one else cares about, and calls us to do the same. All his life in and out of churches he had never heard this: God cares about those who no one else cares about, and calls us to do the same.

The world outside and his own life within took on a sense of unified clarity. He graduated from Duke and then went off to serve the poor and the sick in Haiti. He rose to be a senior member of the faculty at Harvard medical school, though he didn't care all that much for Cambridge, and spent far more time in the rural slums of Haiti. He recruited other talented friends to join the cause, and they formed an international healthcare organization called Partners in Health which has gone on to all but eradicate Tuberculosis in four countries.

For all he has done, Farmer knows the odds are long. Too many people are dying of preventable diseases, and yet he carries on: He says he is fighting the long defeat. He is fighting the long defeat. And yet, there is now a healing of the divisions in his own soul, a healing in the lives of others, an overcoming of the addiction.

There is a great counter story to our addiction to division. And that story is this: God in Christ is addicted to us, and forever addicted to healing the fissures that infect our world and lives. Over and over throughout scripture human beings try to draw the circle more tightly, brand bright lines between weed and wheat, and harvest the wrong crop in the wrong ways. And over and over God improvises a new circle, a new way forward, a new and different harvest of resurrection.

This past spring I took a group of students on a pilgrimage to Poland. We were a grab bag of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. The purpose was to explore the story of the holocaust together, and to try and understand how Poland, the center of Jewish life in Europe for 500 years, where Christians and Jews had lived together, often in harmony for much of that time, was also the place where the nightmare

occurred, where cities, communities, and neighbors could be so quickly and violently divided against one another.

Before World War II the Jewish population of Poland numbered more than three million. Now, there are only a few thousand left in the whole country, almost all having been murdered in Nazi death camps scattered around the Polish countryside.

We stayed for a couple of days in the small community of Lublin. Before the war a vibrant Jewish quarter of commerce, prayer, play and daily life sizzled alongside and intertwined with an equally vibrant Catholic community in that little town. Now, the remembrance of a once flourishing Jewish culture is kept alive by a small dedicated theatre company cataloguing old photos, oral histories, old maps, and performing Jewish folk music and drama.

Fifteen years ago this little theatre company helped organized a grand event. The former synagogue, the center of the Jewish quarter, totally destroyed in the war, used to sit only a few hundred yards from the central Catholic Church in Lublin. A human chain was formed between the two. Jews from all over the world whose family roots were planted and grew for generations in Lublin flew in for the event. Loudspeakers crisscrossed the town so all could participate. And there in the shadow of the Majdonek concentration camp a line of people stretched between the once Jewish synagogue and the Catholic church, a visceral human connection, the power of the symbolism lost on no one. One after another stories were told about those who had been murdered and could now be remembered, and stories were told about Catholic citizens of Lublin who had acted heroically, and confessions were made by those who had not done what they could have done, and those who had behaved egregiously.

After each person spoke they lit a candle and gradually the light was passed from the synagogue and from the church and soon the two lights came together. And there a Catholic priest took the two lights and lit a central candle, and he took a scoop of earth from the former synagogue and he took a scoop of earth from the grounds of the Catholic church, and he mixed earth and light together, as a sign of healing, a sign of hope, a sign that the divisions of the past might be overcome by a gracious future, and he prayed God's blessings on the Jewish family and the Catholic family and on the whole human family.

And then he told his story. See, he had been a young Jewish boy in Lublin at the outbreak of the war. His parents gave him to their neighbors, a Catholic family, who promised to love him and raise him as their own. His entire family was murdered in the Majdonek concentration camp on the outskirts of town. Meanwhile he grew up in Lublin, having no knowledge of his true identity. He became a priest and served the Church faithfully. Before she died, his Catholic mother told him the truth. So he returned to Lublin, seeking to bring together his past and his present, and he has given his life to healing the divisions between Christians, Jews, and others, a living sign of God's relentless addiction to healing our broken world.

I don't know about you, but I'm tired of the long division, the divisions in our world, in the church, and perhaps most of all, in the depths of our hearts and souls. Maybe you are, too. And if so, maybe we can remain together in the field, growing by grace side by side, together fighting the long defeat, until that time when The Lord of the Harvest calls us home, to that place where all wheat becomes bread, and bread becomes his body, and his body is broken, and given, so that our long division will find its end, in a joy that goes on and on and on.

Amen.