

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 12, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Matthew 13:24-31

Scripture Reading: Not Today, Satan!

I was driving to work the other day and found myself lined up at the traffic lights. I was behind a car that had a bumper sticker that said: “Not today, Satan!” And I had to laugh. Because I was having one of those days already, you see. One of those days when nothing seems to go according to plan – the tire on my car looked flat, my phone charger was plugged in all night – but only on the phone end not into the wall plug, so it was almost dead. The cat slept on the black sweater I was planning to wear, and there wasn’t a lint roller to be found. It was all those little annoying things, no grave crisis, but I was already unsettled and feeling tested. I wanted to jump out of my car, and knock on the car’s window and ask the driver: How do you know?

How do you know that you are strong enough to withstand all the bad choices that lie ahead of you today? How do you know that some terrible outcome isn’t right around the corner, just waiting to dash your confident faith into a million pieces? How do you know that Satan even exists?

Not today, Satan.

I wasn’t sure what the car owner meant with that affirmation:

Was it a confident “Wow, I am so righteous and in such a good place with my saviour Jesus, that there is no way Satan can touch me?”

Or maybe it was a challenge: “Test me, Satan, because I am sure I am strong enough to resist everything you throw my way.”

Or maybe it was an exhausted: “I am so tired of all the problems in my life, so today Satan I am begging you to stay away, because I just can’t deal with anything else.”

In more progressive Christian congregations we don’t talk a lot about Satan. And maybe that’s a problem, because that leaves the field open to other voices that paint a pretty wild picture of a superhuman character, with hooves and horns and a fiery pitchfork. Or perhaps a dashing well-dressed man with a brilliant smile, if you’ve been watching the TV series Lucifer.

Doesn’t it seem a little too convenient to blame all the evil in the world on one supernatural character? Meanwhile you are likely ignoring all the complex reasons why, when you’ve planted a field with good seed and your very best intentions, somehow the weeds still make an appearance and put the harvest in jeopardy.

Mighty convenient then to blame some enemy, some demon spirit, some force of evil that is entirely separate from us and our perfect relationship with God.

For our black history month book club I am reading a book by Harrison Mooney. It's an autobiographical work called Invisible Boy. This is the story of a young black man, adopted into a white family, growing up in Canada. At one point he tells the story of standing in line in a store, and another client, an older woman, addressed him with a racist term.

When he went home to tell his parents about it, first of all they said he must have done something to provoke her attack – was his music too loud, did he have his hood up? But he was pretty sure he didn't do anything to offend her, he was still in his church clothes and minding his own business. Then his mother (an evangelical Christian) concluded "She must have been possessed, then, by an evil demon."

Centuries of systemic racism, embedded so deeply in our unconscious that someone doesn't even know they are being offensive when they say the word. Centuries of systemic oppression that can be wiped away with the explanation that Satan and his minions must be behind every evil, including that woman. If you believe that, then it's so easy to say "Not today, Satan!"

Throughout most of our holy scripture, Satan is actually described as not necessarily evil, but a kind of tester, a voice that provokes and challenges our assumptions about God's protection and love for us, and whether we are following up with faithful choices. It's where the term "devil's advocate" comes from. A presence named Satan first appears in the chronicles of King David, then again in the book of Job– testing David, testing God, testing Job.

In the gospels Satan tests Jesus with a new series of temptations, to demonstrate whether Jesus is honestly committed to God's vision of the kingdom. It actually isn't until some of the later epistles that the devil starts to represent an ultimate and evil force in the world.

So the enemy that we encounter in our parable today could be a neighbour they dislike, it could be someone who wants to take over the farm, it doesn't have to be THE enemy or Satan as Matthew explains later in this chapter.

David Lose calls this an honest parable, as most of the parables are honest. It presents a story instead of an easy answer. We can't just swallow a parable whole like a miracle cure. We have to wrap our minds around the puzzle, a puzzle that just doesn't add up the way we might want it to.

This parable is about the ambiguity of life and the difficulty with which we sometimes find ourselves tangling the truth or the good out of a field mysteriously planted with both wheat and weeds. It's an honest parable. Yes, the sower planted with good seed. Yes,

for some reason the weeds have also grown up, who knows why. Yes, the harvest is at risk. And everyone wants answers, everyone wants the quick fix.

The easiest thing would be to rip out those offending weeds – that's what I do in my flower garden. But the sower knows that, in this situation, for every weed that is pulled up, the sprouts of wheat might also be uprooted. So they tell the servants to wait. Wait and see. Weeds and wheat must live side by side until you can tell one root from the other, and it is the right time to separate them.

In so many of our own choices, two thousand years later, we still relate to the sower's dilemma. Maybe it's not about our gardens or crops, but we are still plagued by those hard and puzzling choices.

Will you take the new job with more responsibility to better support your family, or is it better to stay put and spend more time with family? Do you choose the college that has the best program, or do you choose the one that is more affordable? Do you choose the medical treatment that has terrible side effects, or do you forgo that treatment for a better, if shorter, quality of life? Do you give in to peer pressure because friendship and community is important to you, or do you choose to be an individual that stands out?

Our lives are full of situations where there is no easy answer, situations where you can just say "not today, Satan!" and walk away unscathed. Sometimes you have to wait and see, to ponder, to listen, to pray – maybe then you will be able to distinguish the weeds from the wheat.

Jesus tells this parable of the wheat and the weeds to remind us that sometimes waiting to see what comes of our dilemma is the most faithful way to proceed.

It may not be as satisfying as an instant solution, chosen boldly. Jesus paints this picture of the sower's mixed up field to reassure us that whatever we choose, whenever we are ready to make the decision and no matter how challenging the consequences, in the end, God will be with us, helping us to sort things out. To heal from those uprooted roots, to mourn those lost opportunities, to celebrate the new growth and the fulsome harvest.

Life is hard. We make bad choices some of the time, and good choices other times. We do not pretend that being part of a faith community will make life easier. We do not pretend that the Bible or the sermon is going to answer all your questions. We do not proclaim that believing in Jesus will keep Satan at bay forever and always. (And by Satan I mean all the bad things we can't control, the things that test us ...)

Instead we say that we know God is with us throughout the testing time. We know that some people are hurting today, that others are joyful, and still others are wondering if they belong here because of the questions they are having. We invite you to wait and see with us. Not today Satan. We have confidence that God is always with us.

We are all here, with all our differences, with all our dilemmas to seek God's wisdom. Maybe it won't come as a bolt of lightening, or a heavenly staircase, at least I hope not. Maybe God's wisdom comes to us as a field ripe with possibility, of wheat and weeds growing together – and who knows what God will make of them? Who knows what God will make of us? All we can do is wait and see the fulsome harvest that will be all the better because we have been faithful to Jesus' call.

May we live every day, every choice, seeking the wisdom and the patience that God sows in our hearts and in our sharing. Thanks be to God.