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Why Are the Weeds Always Mixed in With the Wheat?

A sermon given by
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Have you ever wished that in life you could surround yourself, your family and your loved ones with a protective bubble? Have you ever wished you could have a protective shield surrounding your loved ones, your family, your community? A shield of safety, a bubble of protection, to protect from the evil in the world. We know there is darkness in the world, and it can be a ruthless place, but we would rather think about evil at arms' length. It's some place over there, in another continent, another time. It's not here, not now, when the darkness comes too close.

This week I heard on the radio about a "paradise tax" for living in Lawrence. The price of housing here is high, the taxes are high, but that's the cost of living in paradise. Lawrence, Kansas: this Camelot place. But these past few weeks have shattered that illusion of paradise. It reminded us that we live in the world. A second-year law student named Jana Mackey was slain by a man she had been in a relationship with, but had broken off the relationship. She had gone back to his house to retrieve some pictures when the tragedy happened.

Some of you knew Jana Mackey, or knew a friend that knew her. Jana came to Lawrence from Hays, Kansas. Her original plan was to focus on music and singing at KU. Over time she realized that her true passion in life was to commit herself to the work of justice; in particular, to work on behalf of women's rights. Jana organized lobbying efforts in Topeka and organized a trip to Washington, D.C. to promote the cause of women's rights. How tragic is the irony that the very injustice she worked so hard to overcome would take her life. This happened here in Lawrence.

It is that phrase, "here in Lawrence," that does not come easily from our lips. We find ourselves saying that this can't be happening, shouldn't be happening. The house you walk or drive past, or the house where some of us partied, or the law school where we teach, or the restaurants on Massachusetts where we eat, or ECM where we hang out—it's here in Lawrence, and it touches us all.

I've spoken with Sarah, the director of Women's Transitional Care Services. She has told me, and I have confirmed it in my research, that one out of every three Kansas women will be a victim of domestic violence or abuse. One out of every three. I also learned that from 960,000 to three million women are physically abused by their husband or boyfriend every year in the United States. I'm talking about a pattern of behavior where one person exerts power and control over another through fear or intimidation, often including the threat of violence. It's true that men can be victims of domestic violence also, but by and large, in a far greater majority of cases men are the perpetrators and women are their victims.

Our Plymouth Covenant says that we "...work and pray for the promotion of justice..." It is important that we as the church, as Plymouth Church, speak out on behalf of all victims everywhere of domestic violence. It is important that we not be silent, that we give voice to the pain and suffering that exists in this community right now.

As your pastor I feel positively called to preach this sermon this morning. For some of you the grief has been a heavy burden. For some of you the emotions are raw. Some of you, like Jana herself, have committed your life to a profession of serving others, of doing good in the world and alleviating pain. And yet by your choice you find yourself in places where the suffering is very close and real, and your own safety becomes a concern. With Jana's death you feel as if a scaffolding of trust has been knocked out from under you, and fear and darkness are creeping into your own heart. This shouldn't be happening, and we want answers.

I wonder if it is possible to be too well-educated. Is it possible to be too intellectually gifted, at least in the sense that we place inordinate faith in our diagnostic tools to try to understand the cause, to define the pathology, and to identify it so that we can understand what causes humans to treat women so badly? Perhaps if we could just understand it, we could overcome it and rise above it. We could weed it out of our community, our culture, and our lives.

The gospel this morning is not so sanguine about this possibility. How timely it is that the lectionary this morning offers us the lesson about the wheat and the weeds being mixed up together. This is another story, like last week's lesson having to do with sowing, seeds and agriculture, about the weeds in our midst. I read again the verses in Matthew 13:26-29:

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. The slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No. In gathering the weeds, you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

Yesterday I was out weeding in my garden. All of you gardeners know about bindweed, the vine that wraps itself around our plants so that you can't really get the weed apart from the plant, they are so tied together. I can't get rid of this weed. Isn't that the way evil is? It's not far in the distance; it's here in our community. It's all mixed in together.

Maya Angelou, the poet, was attending a global conference on evil. People came from all over the world to Texas for this conference. During the meeting a man said, "I've seen real evil. I've felt its force. I visited the concentration camps in Germany." Maya Angelou was stunned by the person's comment. She replied, "Do you mean to tell me that we have come from all over the world to talk nonsense? You don't have to go to Germany. You are here in Texas, where Mexican-Americans were refused a chance to vote. You don't want them to live next to you. You had to go to Germany? I don't want to hear it!"

The weeds and the wheat are mixed in together. It's here among us. Violence is part of our culture and our society. But even more than this, the possibilities of evil reside within each one of us. When we see violence in the world, we must confess our own capacity for violence ourselves. We, too, are tempted to control other human beings through intimidation and fear.

Events such as the murder of Jana Mackey always push us to wonder where evil comes from. In the sacredness of this place we ask why God doesn't prevent these awful atrocities from happening. Here is a young woman on the threshold of her life, intent on doing good in the world. How can God let this happen?

Many have come to the conclusion in the face of such an event as this that this is the final straw in their relationship with God. They have concluded that they cannot worship nor pray to a God who would allow such things to happen, who seems to be powerless to prevent such suffering. My response to that question is twofold: First, tell me about the God you don't believe in; then I'll tell you about the God I don't believe in, either. Most often, agnostics and atheists are rejecting a God that I reject as well. The concept of a God who pulls strings and who can stop horrible things from happening is a human concept of God. It's very important to understand this. I know there is a lot in Bible stories about suffering that seems to be the consequence of divine wrath. But remember, those stories in the Bible are human stories created by and spoken by human beings. Ideas about God that we put on God are not necessarily God.

My second response is that often these conversations around wanting to blame God for the suffering and evil in the world are another way that we humans have of dodging our own responsibility. We let ourselves off the hook by saying it's God's problem, not ours. What faith contributes to the conversation about evil is absolutely critical. Faith says that even more than the social sciences, even more than psychology, even more than what you can learn in education and intellect, we are reminded that there are parts of the human experience that are transcendent and mysterious, and are not problems to be solved. Just as much as love and beauty and truth are transcendent reality, so too are death and evil.

The life we have here on earth is both depraved and glorious, both beautiful and ugly. It is both living in the swamp and being on the mountaintop. It's both misery and promise. Isn't this what Christ came to teach us, came to show us through his own encounter with evil and darkness? Christ revealed to us the darkness, but also in its midst the radical blessedness of love, of grace, of life itself. The evil in the world just is. The weeds are here among us. We don't know how the weeds got here, but they are inside of us.

The important question is, how are we supposed to respond to it? If we cannot fully understand it, if God cannot control it, then what choices do we have? It seems to me there are two critical responses. First, it is well worth remembering the words of the apostle Paul who said we need to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." We need to use common sense. We need to be smart. We need to take precautions. It's not wrong to be suspicious and to have our guard up. Second, we are simply asked to be faithful. We are called to focus less on the evil in others and to focus more on the goodness in ourselves. It is possible that if we put all our energy into fighting evil, we

become the evil that we deplore. The gospel calls us to fight evil with good, the good that is seen in the life of Christ who came to show us how to live, to live with compassion and be faithful to our call.

Jana Mackey's family gathered in Lawrence after the death of their daughter. The manager of the Holiday Inn Holidome in Lawrence invited them to stay at his hotel free of charge. The university community, the law school community, and the Lawrence community came together in an amazing show of support for Jana's family.

Be faithful to the compassion that God calls us to live. It is here that we see glimpses of God who lives among us. God is more than an experience, more than a being. God comes to us in profound flashes of insight that cut through the darkness, and hope that permits human beings to cope with incredible pain, despair, and suffering. God comes in the healing solidarity of love and self-sacrifice.

So, my friends, what have we learned through this tragic death of Jana Mackey, this brutal untimely death?

1. There is evil in the world; there is no explaining it.
2. The presence of evil is not God's problem, it's ours.
3. We are called simply to be faithful to Christ and to live lives of compassion following in the path of Christ.

The promise from God is that God will walk beside us. Amen.