

Plucking Weeds Out of the Soybean Patch  
September 23, 1990

Matthew 13: 24-30 & 36-43

Mark Dunn

Cockleburrs (Southern pronunciation: "kuckleburrs.") are weeds that grow everywhere, especially in soybean fields. (So you will understand the weed I am referring to, I'll translate: the weed is "cockleburrs.") I remember admiring the beauty of a lush and green soybean field. I would also notice cockleburrs growing twice as high as the soybeans. They marred the beauty and continuity of the field. To control them, it is impossible for the farmer to try and pull up the weeds. The plants are like cane stalks and the tap root buries down deep in the soil. Cockleburrs reproduce very efficiently because the seeds are little burrs with stickers on them. They attach themselves to clothing and to deer when they graze in a soybean field and thus are transported to new locations in the field to start a fresh crop.

By now, you may be thinking that Mark has become confused. I have confused the work of preaching with farming. You are supposed to be grappling with the theological and philosophical problems of life, not being given a lecture on soybean farming. I hope I am not confused. This is actually a reflection about the reality of bad existing with good and light existing with darkness.

## I. THE REALITY OF DUALISM

In the parable, Jesus just accepts the reality of the existence of good and evil existing alongside each other in life. In my own theological thinking, I've tried to move away from dualism, but the fact is, good and evil exist.

A. Because of this, we find ourselves wondering why God doesn't eradicate evil, such evil diseases like cancer. This disease not only causes adults to suffer but children? Why does God allow evil dictators to destroy so many good and productive people? Wouldn't it be nice if God would stamp out the Hitler's and the Saddam Hussein's? Wouldn't it be nice here in the United States if he would wipe out the bigoted neo-Nazis? Maybe while he is at it he should wipe out a few Democrats or certain Republicans, especially one senator from Georgia.

B. The problem is when it comes to us choosing what is good or evil, it becomes confusing. When the Pilgrim Fathers arrived to colonize the land, they found it conveniently emptied of the native population. The Indians had cleared the land for planting but because of a small pox epidemic their numbers had been decimated and they had vacated the property. Our pious Pilgrim Fathers saw this as good and even the will of God. Through this epidemic, God had "cleared so many heathen from the path of the Chosen People," wrote one Pilgrim.(p.6) I don't imagine the children of the Indians who had lost their parents would ascribe the epidemic to the love and grace of God.

We have to be careful what we judge to be good and bad. Appearances are sometimes deceiving. In German referendums of 1933, 95 percent of the people voted in approval of Hitler. Some speculate that it was because he was considered to be a good man. He didn't smoke or drink and he built good roads for people.

Why doesn't God stamp out evil? Where would God draw the line? Who would be left? How can there be forgiveness, love and grace?

## II. THE DARK SIDE

When we notice evil or the dark side, it seems to always be personified in the other person. To be a member of a church is to be identified with the good folks. We are the

saints who are building God's kingdom of grace and love and the sinners are out there somewhere.

But the church is also vulnerable to plowing and fertilizing the weeds of sin in the form of "moral pride." The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said that "Moral pride makes virtue the very vehicle of sin." (p.199) Moral pride twists good works into sin.(p.200) We are sympathetic to the needs of the hungry and do give, but are thankful we are not like them. We take pride in our successes and, like the Pharisee, are thankful we are not like the tax collector and other unfortunates. I personally don't like to think of myself as a sinner. To view myself like this erodes my self-esteem. However, to realize that I am a sinner does defuse my self-righteous grandiosity.

A. The truth is that at our deepest core, human beings are similar. Psychologically, Dr. Robert Moore said that, like computers, we all have the same "hard wiring." Human beings have four modes of inner functioning: "king or queen, warrior, priest or lover." Human beings usually function out of one or more of those modes and reject the others. Like the sun shining on the face of the earth, there is a dark side which will eventually show. One year after marriage, a new bride or groom confesses that they don't really know the man or woman they married. The dark side begins to show.

B. If you don't believe there is a dark side to all of us, then I suggest that you do a little observing of people and yourself. I was sharing this thought of the sermon with my wife, Diana, and she shared some observations she had from her career as a nurse. For about ten years, my wife, Diana, was an OB. and delivery room nurse. During the early years of her career, many of the small hospitals where she was employed were continuing to give pain medication to mothers during the birthing process. The combination of medication and stressful circumstances allowed the dark side of their personalities to be revealed. The dark side invaded. Under the stress, highly educated, sophisticated, loving and sweet mothers who would only say "gosh" when angry were transformed into seasoned sailors. There was nothing but four letter words. On the other hand, mothers who drove themselves to the hospital in a pickup truck and walked into the hospital wearing army fatigues, under the influence of medication would sing love songs and talk about pretty flowers. The side that had been put in the abyss was showing.

One can notice the dark side in society in the way we build and design our cities. We build interstate highways around the inner cities and the poverty stricken areas, while the stadiums, parks and zoos are located where they can be easily noticed. That part that we don't like in society, in ourselves or of which we are ashamed, is hidden in a closet or by whatever means possible.

The trouble with the dark side is, it won't stay out of sight. Observe the televangelist several years ago who criticized another evangelist for his adultery. Many of his sermons appropriately condemned infidelity and the destruction of the family. But before long he was confessing his own adultery to his congregation.

C. John A. Sanford in his book, "Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality," said that if we want to know the dark side of our inner selves, observe the people who easily irritate us. Those persons who, just by their presence, raise our anxiety level. My wife, Diana, and myself occasionally stop at McDonald's for lunch. It is not unusual to have to stand in line for ten or fifteen minutes during the noon rush hour. After standing in line for that long, every customer should know what they want to order. It is inevitable that the person who is just ahead of me in the line; who has been standing in line several minutes, has at least ten questions to ask the cashier. After all questions have been

answered, they have to ponder about their decision. By now I am grinding my teeth together. There is a part of me like these individuals existing in my dark side.

The fact is, there is a shadow side as Carl Jung called it, in all of us. And this dark side can invade like Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait if the kingdom of God's love isn't kept strong in us.

### III. HEALING THE DARK SIDE

When we take a close look at the process of our inner life, we really don't have a reason to be morally self-righteous. There is a collective dark side to our society, church and ourselves. We understand why God's grace does not depend on our love, inner purity or our good works. When it comes to being worthy of God's grace, "our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." (Isaiah 64:6) We are always in need of healing and God's grace.

A. Healing our dark side isn't a matter of plucking the weeds out of the soybeans. This disturbs the growth of the good grain. Anyway, at harvesttime, God will separate the good grain from the cockleburrs. How do we find some form of healing and wholeness, now? It is a matter of recognizing and integrating the weeds into our overall image of ourselves. We don't allow the darkness to overcome the light, we just accept the fact that our world and ourselves are similar to a field of good grain, but with a few cockleburrs. It is said that Jesus was the only person who truly healed the dark side of his personhood.

We can be transformed into wholeness, says Johnson, if we "integrate into our conscious attitude all that belongs to our essential wholeness that has been rejected...." Betsy Aspinwall, our church receptionist, shared a story with me about a little boy in her grammar school class who was just as mean as a snake. He was possessed by the "warrior," for he was always into conflict. The class had a pet rabbit and one of the students was to be selected to take care of that rabbit over the Christmas holidays. So everybody had to bring a note from their parents saying it was OK for their child to take care of this pet. This little boy forged his note and everyone knew it. But a very wise teacher selected this little boy to care for the rabbit. This experience transformed him. It put him in touch with his loving and caring side which he had shoved into his dark side.

B. Second, spiritual healing of the dark side, (self-righteousness) comes when we recognize that we succeed only because of the grace of God. As the Church of Christ, we dream and create fresh ways to minister in the community. We sacrifice time, energy, and resources to accomplish worthy goals. If we are successful, we still owe that success to God. "Being grateful to God," says the theologian Leonardo Boff, "generates humility, simplicity, and a feeling of being inhabited by Someone greater than ourselves." This diffuses our self-righteous shadow.

C. Last, the fact that there is a dark side to society, church and me, makes me aware of my need, our need for God's grace. I need grace just as much as John Newton who wrote the old hymn "Amazing Grace." You see, Newton was a ship captain who transported slaves from Africa, and for this he was deeply ashamed.

### CONCLUSION

We live in a world of dualism. There are the good soybeans which feed the hungry and is used as filler in hamburgers. There are the cockleburrs which choke out the good grain in our society and our world. Our inward lives also consist of the good grain and the bad weeds, light and darkness. But it is the love and grace of God that transforms darkness into light. Amen.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

**Dear God our Redeemer: thank you for giving us your gift of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him we see the goal for our wholeness. Through the Christ, nations, races and classes are united in the bonds of a common faith and devotion.**

**On the other side we understand human weakness and the need to pray that you will save thy church from self-righteousness, from pride of race or class, lest we hinder Christ's work. Inspire us who call ourselves Christian to do all we can to serve and advance your kingdom of love and realness.**

**Dear God and ruler of all nations, we live in a world of disorder and conflict in consequence to human behavior and the roads we take away from your will. We have yet to reach a maturity which handles differences and conflict in creative ways. The warrior in us is forever constellating and, as a nation, one has to use the tools of war to protect ourselves from invasion. We pray deeply for the lives and families of the persons who are standing tall in Saudi Arabia to protect the weak and return a country to its inheritance. We pray for our enemies since your love and grace extends to all your children. We pray for the healing of our estrangement.**

**We lift up to your healing presence, Dear God, those who are sick in mind and body. We bring all who are afraid, lonely, feeling unloved, unneeded and who are sorrowing. For all those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death, resurrect their hope and give them the strength to actively cope. Especially, we pray for the little children who are critically ill or who are forced by circumstances to live under adverse conditions. We pray for their healing and transformation.**

**Lord whose love is greater than we can imagine, give to us, your children, the spiritual depth and the will to be an instrument of care and healing. Forgive us when we fail to be that instrument. In Christ's name we pray.**