

Proper 11, Year A
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

There is a genre of movies that particularly appeal to me. They are action movies where the hero makes right, or avenges wrongs that were done to innocent victims. You know the kind of movies I mean. They are movies starring actors like Clint Eastwood, Steven Segal, Arnold Schwarzeneger, Sigourney Weaver and Bruce Willis. I'm the kind of sports fan that likes to see the other team lose by a huge margin, just so that there is no doubt who wins in the end. I have to admit that when there is someone at work who, deliberately, tries to sabotage or one-up another worker, I want to see them "taught a lesson they will never forget". It is not my job to teach them, but I want to be there when they are shown up for their crimes.

When I was younger, I wondered why there was evil in the world. As Rabbi Kushner asked, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" It pains us to view the evil in the world. We see the innocent children killed in drive by shootings. We observe innocent victims of roadside bombings and car bombings on the news daily. Wives, husbands and children are killed by their ex-spouses and criminals. Countries develop technologies, meant for peaceful living, into weapons of war and threaten their neighbors with them. Renegade forces are free to murder, steal food, rape and torture. Truly, if I believed that the evil of the world has been put there, by God, to test or teach us I would be in the middle of a crisis of faith.

The Gospel today, however, gives us another view. These things are with us because they were planted in the world, like tares, or 'bastard wheat', were sometimes planted in a field of good wheat by an enemy. Tares could not easily be identified when the plants were small. They looked like regular wheat. It was only when the plants were ready to be harvested that the gray color of the grains of the tares could be separated out of the good grains of wheat by hired workers after the threshing of the wheat. The good and bad were left together to grow. Sometimes in my garden the weeds look like the plants when they are young. I have to wait to see what the plants grow into, at times, before I can discern the weeds and remove them.

So it is with us. It is not always easy to detect evil in people. We are often shocked by evil committed by seeming peaceful people. Likewise we can be surprised by good deeds done by those who seem evil.

In New Orleans in 1960, a judge ordered six-year-old Ruby Bridges to attend first grade in the all white William Frantz Elementary School. Ruby's family prayed that God would help them all through this time and that Ruby would be a credit to her people, her family and her country.

On the first of many days, weeks and months, Ruby was greeted by people carrying signs, screaming names and trying to prevent her entry into the school. She had to be accompanied by armed U.S. Marshalls, because the local police refused to assist her. The white families in the neighborhood refused to send their children to school. Ruby

attended her first grade class alone with her teacher, Mrs. Henry. Mrs. Henry was sure that Ruby, who seemed calm and at ease, would crack under the daily stress of that walk to and from school. One day, Ruby stopped in front of the school and appeared to be talking to the crowd. They were angry and screaming at her. When she entered the building, her teacher asked what she had said to the crowd. She said that she hadn't been talking to them. She was praying. Usually, she stopped two blocks away from school and prayed. On this particular morning, she had forgotten to pray and so stopped in front of the school to pray. This was her prayer:

“Please, God, Try to forgive those people, because even if they say those bad things, they don't know what they're doing. So You could forgive them just like you did those folks a long time ago when they said terrible things about you.”

We could all take some pages from Ruby's book of wisdom. She resisted the evil around her by praying for her enemies. She resisted the evil around her by walking peacefully through the crowds.

She resisted the evil around her by not responding with evil. She resisted the evil by continuing to go to school and learn. She resisted the evil by obeying the law.

Later that year, two white boys entered Ruby's class. Their parents were tired of the boys getting into trouble. The crowds were angry. We know “the rest of the story” as Paul Harvy tells it. Ruby attended the William Frantz Elem.

School and graduated. She graduated from high school and eventually got married. Her sons attended school in New Orleans. A business woman, Ruby founded the Ruby Bridges Educational Foundation. This foundation promotes parent involvement in the public schools. Those who stood in the picket lines screaming at Ruby; what happened to them? Did they have a change of heart? Did they realize, ever, and repent? Did they gain, through Ruby, a chance at redemption? I think so. I hope so.

It is not the action hero way that is the answer to this parable. That job is God's and we don't need to be there to see it, either. The answer to the evil is the loving, firm, faith-filled, Prayerful response of a six-year-old child. That is the command – Love one another.