

Just about every story needs a hero and a villain, doesn't it? This has been true since the very beginning of human culture, and usually distinguishing the two from each other is very easy. We know that in books and movies the hero and the villain are not only distinguished from each other by attitudes and actions, but also physically. Take a moment to think about the most infamous fictional villains – something makes them look like a villain, doesn't it? However, sometimes fiction creates a villain who is not so obvious – in fact, the villain might even have attractive or admirable qualities.

As any student of English literature knows, Milton's "Paradise Lost" presents a Satan who, while being the essence of evil, also reflects heroic qualities. We see similar themes emerge in contemporary stories such as the Harry Potter series, where Professor Snape appears to be one of Harry's greatest antagonists, but ultimately becomes heroic through his very sad and sympathizing backstory. When Steven de Souza wrote the screenplay for the movie "Diehard," he wanted Bruce Willis' antagonist, Hans Gruber, to not only be sophisticated and intelligent, but somewhat likeable. It is probably no coincidence that the late, great Alan Rickman played both Professor Snape and Hans Gruber with a sinister charm that is still captivating audiences today.

When it comes to the real world, it is sometimes not so easy to distinguish evil from good, is it? Some of us may have been following the sad story of Charlie Gard, the British infant born with a rare and incurable genetic deformity. The Great Ormond Street Hospital, one of the best children's hospitals in the world, had placed the infant on life support. Charlie's doctors had agreed with the parents on attempting some experimental therapy, but after the child started to have multiple seizures, the doctors decided that the situation was hopeless, and the infant was suffering too much. Charlie's parents still

wanted to try the therapy, and the case wound up in the British courts. The public immediately took sides, both in Britain and everywhere else, including America. Either the hospital was evil in its intent to kill the infant, or the parents were evil for prolonging their child's suffering. Just a few days ago the court ruled for the hospital, and the child died shortly after being removed from the ventilator. Many have been reacting to the final resolution using the language of "win/lose," but was there a winner and a loser? And where is the evil in this sad story, except maybe in the very nature of life itself?

That profound question about the nature of evil in the world was just as troubling in the time of Christ as it is today; perhaps even more so, because the expectation of a change in this dilemma was greater, centered on the essential definition of the Messiah. While the prophets in the Jewish tradition had made it clear that the primary effect of the Messiah would be spiritual, that was very difficult for religious Jews to accept in the first century, when it was so easy for them to create heroes and villains.

Was there any greater example of villainy than the Roman Empire? Even today Rome is still used as an archetype of evil, perhaps second only to Nazi Germany. There is no question that Rome stood the test of an identifiable evil, but those around Christ, including his followers, had many more villains that they could also claim. The Gentiles were considered untouchables, and any social intercourse with non-Jews was subject to judgment by the temple and by God. As Bill pointed out in a recent sermon, the Samaritans, who were Jews themselves, were despised as blasphemous traitors who practiced an idolatrous form of Judaism. Evil was even attributed by the Jews to the less fortunate of their countrymen, because the sick, the poor, the suffering, and the victims of

misfortune were considered to be paying the price for either their evil or the evil of some dead ancestor.

With all of these villains, it was inevitable that the Jewish view of God's Messiah would be one of a hero who would create a new world order, destroying Israel's enemies in order to establish an earthly kingdom of spiritual perfection. Prophecies such as those from Joel, which applied the image of the harvest to judgment, were used to typify the Messiah's purpose: "Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wind press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near, in the valley of decision."

But Christ, in his description of his purpose, did not accommodate the expectations of the Jewish nation. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus presents a series of images which we call "the kingdom parables," because Christ uses these images to delineate and define what he means when he speaks of the kingdom, or the reign of God. Christ declares that he has come to initiate a new order of living that carries with it some clear and present realities, but not regarding the end of evil: *'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'*"

Jesus' image would have been familiar to his listeners as a genuine and illegal act. It was against Roman law for one seeking vengeance to plant a type of ryegrass in a newly-sown wheat field. The ryegrass in its early stages looked exactly like new wheat, but as it grew it poisoned the rest of the field, destroying the harvest because of the difficulty of removing it. As Jesus later explains, the images in the parable are not allegorical but clearly defined: Jesus is the sower, and the field is the kingdom of God. The enemy is evil personified by Satan, and the servants are the angels. The weeds are those who embrace and commit evil in the world, while the wheat is the believing righteous. The harvest is the final judgment, in which the weeds will be bound and destroyed, leaving only the healthy wheat to be collected into the safety of the barn.

In one of my favorite books, Larry McMurtry's "Lonesome Dove," the ranger Augustus McCrae responds to the young sheriff July Johnson after July's son and his deputy are killed by the notorious murderer Blue Duck. July Johnson expresses his own helplessness in his ability to get revenge against the evil renegade, which Augustus knows to be a fruitless endeavor considering their situation. Attempting to comfort the grieving young man, Augustus speaks these words: *"Son, this is a sad thing," Augustus said. "Loss of life always is. But the life is lost for good. Don't you go attempting vengeance. You've got more urgent business. If I ever run into Blue Duck I'll kill him. But if I don't, somebody else will. He's big and mean, but sooner or later he'll meet somebody bigger and meaner. Or a snake will bite him or a horse will fall on him, or he'll get hung, or one of his renegades will shoot him in the back. Or he'll just get old and die."* "Don't be trying to give back pain for pain," he said. *"You can't get even measures in business like this."*

Whether consciously or not, McMurtry's words echo Christ's teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God and the reality of evil in the world. Just as Augustus is trying to teach the young man patience, so is Jesus trying to teach patience to his followers, and trust in the absolute goodness of a just God. But Christ's message to his followers is more urgent, because it is our impatient judgments that destroy, not the evil in this world, but the good in ourselves.

Jesus' parable makes it clear that when it comes to the weeds in our spiritual gardens, we just have to live with them. Christ is not saying that there is no answer to the wrongs that humans inflict on each other. Christ urges us, just like the prophets, to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God; but Christ is also saying that, because of our sinful natures, we do not have the ultimate answer to evil within our grasp, though many will claim just that.

Hitler made such a claim when he decided that the elimination of the Jews would bring about a new world order for Germany. We still hear such claims made today – that if we just eliminate a group such as immigrants, or a leader, or a style of government, or the rotten people or institutions in our communities, all will be right with the world. But according to Christ, the world will never be right, because we will never be right. The weeds that grow in our gardens grow within us. Grace grants us the ability to pull these ever-growing weeds out of our hearts, but only Christ can collect the ultimate harvest of judgment, because that task belongs to the Messiah alone.

So what is our task until then? Our task is to simply to be God's wheat in this world – to live in hope, practice our faith, and to feed with love and mercy the lives and the hearts of

those around us. If we tend the gardens of our hearts, we can feed the world – even in the midst of weeds.