

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 23, 2023 – 8 Pentecost
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 – The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds
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Parables are rich teaching tools because we can always go deeper in our understanding of what they mean for us. Today's Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is a good example. This parable is found only in Matthew's Gospel. It is in two parts. In the first part Jesus is teaching the crowds, and in the second part he is instructing his disciples privately. By the time Jesus shares this parable with the people, he has begun to experience rejection and opposition to his message and ministry. He knows that he is showing and telling the truth about God's kingdom. His confidence in this does not waver. Then why is he meeting rejection and opposition? The parable suggests an answer.

The Son of Man – Jesus – sowed good seed in the field, but an enemy – the evil one – came in the night and sowed weeds among the wheat. We may not be comfortable with language about “the devil,” but perhaps we can all agree that there is a living force of good and there is a living force of evil in the world. If we are at all honest, we recognize that within ourselves the wheat and the weeds grow together. In the famous phrase of Martin Luther, each of us is “*simul justus et peccator*,” at the same time righteous and a sinner. Good and evil grow together.

In the church the wheat and the weeds grow together as well. We would have to be very naïve to think otherwise. The “weeds” in the church can be massive stumbling blocks to people raised in the church and to those unfamiliar with Christian faith. How can we think productively about the weeds in the church?

Thomas G. Long, a Presbyterian preacher and teacher, writes these helpful words about how today's parable speaks to the situation in the church: “[The parable] assures us that this is not the way God wants it to be, nor will it always be this way. Selfishness, abuse, greed, and hatred are the enemies of God, and the fact that they are an inevitable part of God's people does not mean that they are a part of God's will. The simple fact that the church always has its share of hypocrites does not make the gospel hypocritical, nor does it destroy the integrity of God. When all is said and done, this evil will not endure; the goodness of God will prevail; the tender wheat will be protected and saved” (From Matthew, Westminster John Knox Press).

The parable makes the clear point that it is God's business to judge between the wheat and the weeds. Jesus often teaches that judgment rightfully belongs to God alone. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matthew 7:1-2).

It is not for us to judge the worth of another human being or the state of another human being's soul. While we must make judgments about behavior – how else could we make ethical decisions or work for justice and goodness? – we must try to resist the temptation to judge other people as people, as souls. Such judgment belongs to God. After all, it is God's harvest. It is sometimes difficult to leave the judgment of others to God. I often find it very difficult. But we put our own souls in peril if we forget that judgment is God's business.

Do you remember Jesus' Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector recorded in Luke's Gospel (18:9-14a)? Listen to this familiar parable in the colloquial translation called “The

Message.” “[Jesus] told [this] story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people. ‘Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: “Oh God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.” Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, “God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.” Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face””.

Dorotheus of Gaza was a 6th century Christian who lived in the desert of Egypt, one of the “desert fathers.” He commented on this parable: “That Pharisee who was praying and giving thanks to God for his own good works was not lying but speaking the truth, and he was not condemned for that. For we *must* give thanks to God when we are worthy to do something good, as [God] is then working with us and helping us.” [The Pharisee was condemned] “because he said, ‘I am not like this tax-collector.’ It was then that he made a judgment. He condemned a person and the disposition of his soul – to put it shortly, his whole life. Therefore, the tax collector rather than the Pharisee went away justified” (From To Love as God Loves by Roberta Bondi).

Dorotheus of Gaza makes an important point clear. We are allowed to make judgments about behavior, and we are allowed to acknowledge when our own behavior is good, as long as we thank God for helping us do good. But we are not allowed to condemn another’s soul. We must leave that to God. And a healthy recognition of how prone we are to make mistakes, how we so often fail to love, can be very helpful in protecting us against a self-righteous attitude toward others. We all stand in need of God’s mercy. We are all God’s beloved children.

A final word of caution concerning our understanding of the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. Throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been groups who emphasize God as a ruthless and all-powerful agent of destruction who will punish evil-doers. “Collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned.” The threat of hell and the fear of everlasting hell-fire. The image of individual people, individual souls in everlasting torment.

How can we make sense of the parable without accepting this understanding of God? I think we must first be clear that in God’s kingdom of love there will be no room for whatever is “not love.” That which is evil cannot and will not ultimately be allowed to impede or harm or destroy that which is good. The good news which Jesus shares through this parable is that the enemy of God will be defeated, utterly annihilated, no longer a threat to the Son of Man, to God’s kingdom, or to the people who love God. At the time of God’s harvest, no weeds will crowd out the wheat, that is, no evil will crowd out the good. The parable’s startling language makes the fate of good and of evil absolutely clear.

What might this mean for us, God’s creatures, now both “saint and sinner”? This message may give us courage, courage we need to grow in God’s ways and to follow Jesus despite the evil we encounter in the world, the church, and ourselves. We may embrace hope founded on God’s promise of a future full of only goodness and love. And there is direction for how to live our lives. Knowing that what is good will last and what is evil will not, we may be strengthened to take steps toward the good and to “weed out” what is bad in the world, the church, and ourselves. We can be assured that God will help us, for it is God’s will for the good harvest to be plentiful. In Jesus’ name. Amen.