

Sixteenth Sunday: Wheat & the Weeds

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Romans 8, 26-27; Matthew 13:24-43

Last Sunday we had the parable of the Sower, this Sunday we have the parable of the Man Sowing Good Seed. These agricultural images are very appropriate to Jesus' listeners who were much closer to the land than most of us.

This is a completely different approach from the scribes and the Pharisees who worked from the Law. Religion for them was a matter of following laid down instructions: "keep these rules and God will be happy with you!" is what they seem to be saying. And: "if you don't understand them just ask us and we'll explain them to you because we are the experts!"

But with a closer inspection of these parables we find that some of them are very odd. Because we don't know the background or the actual situation we tend to take them at face value and believe that what Jesus says is true - but they wouldn't have sounded like that to his listeners.

In the parable today, the people would have been puzzled with the behavior of the farmer in the story. No one in their right mind would leave the weeds growing in the field till harvest time. They would multiply and choke the wheat....check out your own gardens.

At first read, most of us probably think that someone had snuck into the field and planted the weeds with the wheat. We are told that "an enemy has done this," but we are not told what exactly "this" is that the enemy did.

Have you ever gone to a nursery to buy grass seed, for instance? If you read the label for ingredients, you'll see a percentage of grass seed called out along with a certain percentage of filler and weed seed in the package.

But here, if we examine the parable more closely about the 'enemy' sowing the weeds, we might see that it's not necessarily the case. All human beings are created in God's image and likeness. Just as all

humanity is one, so the weeds and wheat are one. It is not that some of the seed was bad, as if some people are just bad seeds. The weeds and the wheat are one. If we checked the DNA of the weeds we'd find that they are actually wheat. Nothing else was planted.

So although Jesus speaks figuratively because his listeners can understand, that doesn't mean they don't find something odd about it. Jesus is trying to convey a spiritual truth. The parable is about the problem of evil in the world and how God gives even the worst of us plenty of time to convert.

Jesus uses parables with familiar images, but that does not mean he's making things easier for them. By making things understandable for them/us Jesus is actually clarifying the moral choices that life lays before them/us. He is forcing them/us to choose which direction to take.

The parable gives a comparison between those who do good and those who do evil. Jesus seems to be suggesting that we are either virtuous and will shine like the sun or we are evil and will be thrown into the blazing furnace. There's no middle ground.

If we are each anything, we have a bit of good and a bit of bad in us. Not completely bad! But then, we're not completely good either!

This puts us all in a bit of a quandary. We want to be good but we find ourselves badmouthing our neighbors; we want to be holy but we don't have a very active prayers life; we want to be trustworthy but, well, if nobody's looking?!

So, if we exist only for ourselves, if we plan our lives, beginning to end, so that we have what we want and we take everything we can get, aren't we weeds? Our fruit is supposed to be service to/for others. Our fruit is supposed to be love: love of God and love of neighbor. A human being who does not love unselfishly is as useless as a stalk of wheat that does not produce grains.

Jesus' parable underscores the fact that the human community is a "mixed bag" of wheat and weeds, of good and bad; that judgment is

God's sole privilege and that judgment will be rendered only at the harvest, or end time; **until then there is ample opportunity for change and growth.** Weeds can be transformed into wheat; the bad can respond to God's invitation and turn to good.

We might not like what we find when we get to the pearly gates. Will we gain access or not? It could be a bit of a moot point! There might be a lot of hemming and hawing!

Jesus is highlighting the fundamental choice all of us must make in our life. Naturally he wants us to choose the good, to follow the way he outlines for us. But it must be our absolutely free choice which leaves open the possibility that we might make a fundamental choice for evil, a choice not to go the way Jesus sets in front of us.

And he gives us time to convert, time to turn our lives around; **but this time is not without limit for there will be the proverbial 'day of reckoning.'** The parable warns us to start making those changes now because one day the reaper will gather in the harvest, and it will be too late.

In a little book called the Screwtape Letters, by CS Lewis, the devils are having a meeting and trying to work out better ways to tempt humankind. The smallest devil comes up with the best temptation of all. He says to the others, "Let us tell the humans there is no hurry."

This really is one of the most insidious of all temptations. We can so easily think that we can do evil today and seek forgiveness tomorrow only to find that tomorrow never comes.

Nothing is more hazardous for us human beings than to pass judgment on the relationship of any individual with God. Even in cases of obvious wrongdoing we don't always know the circumstances that may affect final judgment on that person's behavior.

God alone has the privilege of judging and distinguishing among us, and God is not quick to condemn. Neither may those who profess to believe in God condemn one another. Like the farmer who allowed the wheat

and weeds to grow together, God reaches out with understanding leniency to all, encouraging all of us to persevere and make a new start.

As a side note: yesterday, we had the funeral service for Carol Weiland's husband, Jim. In preparing for the service, one of the things Carol told me about Jim was that when he was diagnosed with his illness, she asked him if he had anything on his 'bucket list' – anything that he had left undone that he would want to accomplish. He told her 'no,' he thought he had led a good life. I believe he was focused on living each day to the best of his ability, and loving his family and friends. He had his eye on the prize.

My prayer for all of us is that we be more wheat than weeds and that we produce much fruit and when we are at the end, we have no regrets. We can say we lived a good life...and we, too, will have our eyes on the prize.

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