

Let Them Grow Together
Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43
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Have you ever noticed the English Flower Garden across the street from the church? Have you ever noticed Mary Lou weeding her garden and wondered how does she know the flowers from the weeds? If she does know, then she is likened to the Son of Man in our Gospel Lesson this morning. If she doesn't, then she is no better than the slaves of the householder who want to uproot the good with the bad.

The Gospel says: Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time . . .

Have you ever compared the foreign affairs to that of the parable of the wheat field intermingled with weeds? Unfortunately, it is normal to think that we are the wheat and those who don't agree with us are the noxious weeds. Take the recent war in Iraq and Afghanistan for example. In this wheat field of the world, there was and still is strong sentiment to believe that those two countries who shelter terrorists are the weeds and they must be rooted out if the world is to prosper. Unfortunately, in the process of eliminating, the so-called evil, there are innocents who are also being uprooted. Sometimes I wonder whether it would have been better to allow the differing sides of the issue to grow together until the harvest. Difficult response. Difficult question, with no easy answers.

Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time . . .

As I look at this parable, I believe it has something to say to the world, our nation and the local church too. First, there is an emphasis on the farmer's patience: "Let both grow together until the harvest" (v. 30a). Therefore, I want to ask:

- "Did Jesus use this parable to point out that human beings are not competent to make the kind of judgments implied in separating wheat from weeds; in plucking out what they think are weeds, they may very well be pulling up wheat?"
- "Did Jesus imply that only God can make such judgments, and in due course this will be done?" If so, then we must be more patient with one another, not necessarily selling out what we believe, or throwing the baby out with the bath water, but dialoguing together, making sure we know who we are and who the others are, before drastic measures are taken.

Even then we must be careful because we are not the householder of the parable.

Secondly, as we look at the context of this parable which is only found in the Gospel of Matthew, it probably was written specifically for the fledging church as it was establishing itself after Pentecost. The parable presupposes a church situation in which Jesus' disciples are tempted to become involved in purging evil. Since "the field is the world" (verse 38), it is unclear whether the desire of Jesus' followers is to remove evil from the world or, as is more likely, from within the church. By means of this interpretation Matthew assures himself and others that a day of reckoning will come to these pseudo-disciples; the glorified Christ will send forth his angels to purify the church of all who disregard the moral law. Matthew's church certainly contained undesirable elements and in that church as in many others, the desire to achieve purity and perfection was in tension with the obligation to accept, forgive, and restore.

As I have read the reports of the various denominational meetings in the past couple of weeks, the desire to achieve purity and perfection is in tension with the obligation to accept, forgive and restore. The Southern Baptists want to make sure there is a hell where the unrepentant can go. The United Methodists, as well as other denominations, are at odds whether gay people can be ordained. The Minnesota Bishop, Sally Dyck, stated that "our church is not of one mind. Families, churches and communities differ in their understanding about the way to go forward." Therein lies the dilemma.

If this parable tells us anything, it tells us that the ministry of Jesus Christ within the church and the world is messy. And there are those who would like to purge everything that seems to be inconsistent with the gospel and those who would like to live with the mess, as it were. Living within the mess is biblical not only in this passage but others that lift up the saying that by their fruit they shall be known. This involves trusting God and believing that while we live together that things will become evident just as the weeds became evident that they were not wheat.

Little side bar to by their fruit they shall be known. There was big hue and cry about Casey Anthony being exonerated of all murder charges like O.J. Simpson. However, O.J. is in prison in Nevada due to other inappropriate behaviors. Will that be Casey Anthony's legacy, that she will be known by her fruit?

When mess hits the proverbial fan in the church and we try to purge ourselves of the mess both personally and corporately, there are times when we do the kingdom

a great disservice. Why? Because some of our attempts at the moment may be premature. Mess is sometimes defined as our impatience to wait for the Lord of the harvest. We don't have all the knowledge yet. God ways are not our ways and neither God's thoughts our thoughts, says the prophet Isaiah. What I mean by waiting here is to remain in covenant with one another, working out our salvation in fear and trembling. Things usually reveal themselves in due time to make the appropriate decisions. As in the parable, there is a season of planting and of harvesting. In others words, there is a timeframe.

Choosing sides in the midst of mess is not helpful either. Such attempts have as their usual result the disturbance and loss of the faithful in the process of seeking to eliminate the unfaithful. I have had my share of that in my 30 years of ministry. One of the most difficult aspects of ministry is when someone wants to purge the church of something. Choose sides. Make it right. They want the pastor or the elders or the denomination to fix things that are messy rather than working through it in a covenantal relationship. ***Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time . . .*** says the parable. Life is always messing but it is messier when black and white decisions are made and when voices are not fully heard.

One final thought, the task of judging between good and evil belongs not to us but to Christ. We are not to judge says Matthew in (7:1) but rather called to work at reconciliation in (18:15-16) and to forgive without limitation in (18:21-22).

Again, all of this is not to say that the parable demands that we be resigned to the work of the evil one in our churches or in the world and just try to make the best of things. We are still called to be salt and light in the world. While mess is present, we are called to remain faithful to the covenant to love God and one another, and to expect the Lord of the harvest to deal with the weeds and the one who planted them in God's good time.

Our epistle lesson from Romans 8 sharpens my eyes to see more clearly when I am caught in a mess. This passage offers a hope I cannot see on my own. Paul has a way of encouraging me to peek over his shoulder. He shares his spectacles of faith so that I can see with him—through the immediate, into a wide-open country of all living hope. He says: "I consider the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). In that verse, Paul has double vision which allows him to see two realities at once.

It's not that Paul is ignoring the present moment. He looks around and takes note. He sees suffering. Something is wrong, off-balanced. Nothing is as it was meant to

be. With Paul's first sight we see that suffering is universal and it doesn't discriminate. Because life has a way of dealing bad hands, we all experience irrational, unjustified, senseless sorrows. Paul sees that faith is not an insurance policy from the harsh realities of life.

I often feel this most keenly when, despite careful planning, everything changes in a moment. I get a word that my 91 year old mother's health is declining. . . my brother Lee has another setback. . .my sister's marriage is over. . . and nothing is ever the same. I think of the sadness of the Brooklyn family whose son was murdered this past week and wonder how one goes on.

At such moments I need Paul's second sight. Paul's double vision pushes me out of my presumed world. He points me to see a reality beyond my reality, a glory to frame my suffering, a hope to hold my cup of grief. This is not an invitation to escapism, or a second naiveté. It is a something else entirely. It is a world that sustains this one.

Paul's second sight also points me to the kingdom of God, where hope, not suffering, has the last word. Paul gives us binoculars to see into the expansive landscape of salvation, where the risen Jesus has inaugurated a new age of the Spirit that is breaking in upon us, proclaiming that even in suffering we are heirs of this brave new world of glory (Rom. 8:15-17). We are not living in a wasteland but in a rose garden where nature is never spent. (Compare T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland*, written before his conversion, with *The Four Quartets*, in which Eliot describes the world as a rose garden. See also Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur," a poem that explores this double vision). Paul reminds us that we are not forgotten, that we are not abandoned, but adopted into the family of the Trinity, with full rights of the children of God.

This is the hope that saves. That we are not our own, but belong body and soul, to Jesus Christ. With his double vision, Paul helps me to see that even in suffering we are all living in a geography of hope. We long. We cry. We wait with patience in the midst of our current experience, but we do all this in the context of a grace whose circumference is larger than we can possibly imagine. This is the vision we need to remember. This is the vision of the church for a world that is blind.

Allow me to close with another parable of the wheat and the weeds. One afternoon in the middle of the growing season, a bunch of farmhands decided to surprise their boss and weed his favorite wheat field. No sooner had they begun to work, however, that they began to argue-first about which of the wheat-looking

things were weeds and then about the rest of the weeds. Did the Queen Anne's lace pose a real threat to the wheat, or could it stay for decoration? And the blackberries? They would be ripe in just a week or two, but they were, after all, weeds-or were they? And the honeysuckle-it seemed a shame to pull up anything that smelled so sweet.

About the time they had gotten around to debating the purple asters, the boss showed up and ordered them out of his field. Dejected, they did as they were told. Back at the barn he took their machetes away from them, poured them some lemonade, and made them sit down where they could watch the way the light moved across the field. At first, all they could see were the weeds and what a messy field it was, what a discredit to them and their profession, but as the summer wore on they marveled at the profusion of growth-tall wheat surrounded by tall goldenrod, ragweed, and brown-eyed Susans. The tares and the poison ivy flourished alongside the Cherokee roses and the milkweed, and it was a mess, but oh what a glorious mess, and when it had all bloomed and ripened and gone to seed the reapers came.

Carefully, gently, expertly, they gathered the wheat and made the straw mixed with clay into bricks for the oven where the bread was baked. And the fire that the weeds made was excellent, and the flour that the wheat made was excellent, and when the harvest was over the owner called them all together-the farmhands, the reapers, and all the neighbors-and broke bread with them, bread that was the final distillation of that whole messy, gorgeous, mixed-up field, and they all agreed that it was like no bread any of them had ever tasted before and that it was very, very good. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations forever and ever.