

7 Pentecost, Proper 11, Yr. A
July 23, 2017
Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Last week we heard the parable of the sower; this week we're back in the fields again, at least metaphorically. I think it's worth noting that Matthew was writing at a time when his young community was facing, not only persecution, but also diversity. The concern was about purity in the church, or that age-old question of who's in and who's out, phrased in this morning's Gospel as who among us are the weeds and who are the wheat? It seems some problems are so deeply intertwined with being human that they are always with us – and this problem is a perfect case in point. At a time when our country is so divided that each half is tempted to think of the other half as weeds and themselves as the wheat, it seems like this parable is particularly applicable. A word of caution, however. As we mentioned last week, parables are open-ended and like any metaphors, they can be pushed too far. In this parable, we might think that Jesus is counseling passivity – see evil? – don't do anything about it. But that would be to miss Matthew's larger point by reading this parable in isolation. So, later in this same Gospel, there's advice on what to do when there truly is a "weed" in the community – and how to approach the situation with compassion, but still with an eye to protecting the community which can mean that after every effort is made at inclusion, a person may still have to be asked to leave. So, again, the caution about reading any given section in isolation.

But, with that in mind, let's look more closely at this parable and at the human reality Jesus is addressing. As with the parable last week, this one can be read on many levels – it can be a statement about cosmic reality, about the battle between good and evil, with good winning in the end; it can be read about Matthew's community as I mentioned earlier; it could be read about Jesus' own experience; or it can be read about the church in general or, finally, as a caution about how humans often function. I've mentioned Matthew's community, which was faced with diversity of opinions as well as persecution. In those situations, there's always a temptation to circle the wagons, to draw lines, to focus on the in/out question, to figure out who's a weed. But this could also be seen as Jesus' own experience. He grew up poor, a member of an oppressed ethnic minority. To the Jewish community, the Romans were the weeds; however, to the Romans, it was the Jews who were the problem. After all, I can imagine the Romans saying, we're running an empire here, we're trying to create the Pax Romana, we're just trying to have everyone get along. And these stiff-necked Jews – they're the weeds in our garden! And we shouldn't forget that all the powers of Jesus' time – whether the Romans or the leaders of the Jews- saw Jesus as a weed, one that they tried very hard to eradicate.

I'd like us to think about this scripture, and the problem it points to, by looking at several things: first, at the problem of identifying "weeds"; then the issue of premature judgment; and then our response to the parable – should we be passive? How are we being asked to respond here?

So, then, first is the issue of identification of “weeds.” I’m sure you’ve heard this before, but apparently, the weeds here are darnel or tares. This isn’t only a pesky plant, but it looks like wheat and so is able to hide out effectively. Its roots manage to tangle themselves around the roots of the wheat and, even worse, if it gets through to the harvest, its seeds are harmful. So the laborers here would have had a legitimate point from an agricultural point of view. But Jesus is trying to make a theological point. So in the parable, the farmer tells the laborers that the wheat is doing OK even in the presence of the weeds. In fact, it’s the laborers and their idea of how to proceed that would be the bigger problem. No, the farmer tells them, just wait, just let it be, because, to begin with, you are not able to tell good from bad and, even if you could, in trying to get rid of the bad, you’d destroy the good, because they’re intertwined.

So, there’s the first caution. We can’t always tell the good from the bad. History is full of examples of this. One of the worst is the story of the early Crusaders. Heading for the Holy Land, they came upon an Arab village and slaughtered everyone there, assuming that these folks were the infidels, the WEEDS. It was only later, turning over the dead bodies, that they discovered that their victims wore crosses - they were Christians. It had never occurred to these European knights that Christians could be brown as well as white. (Taylor, *Bread of Angels*) That’s an example of judging out of ignorance. A friend of mine tells about being cut off on the highway by a fellow speeding past and, as he was about to make some WEED comment, his wife said, “I bet his wife is in the back seat of the car giving birth to their baby.” Of course, he said, she couldn’t know that that was true, but, then again, he couldn’t know that it wasn’t. It became their family comment in similar situations – a reminder that we rarely, if ever, have the full story and, therefore, we’re never in a position to judge.

Another illustration comes from the study we did last year on the Reformation. With the best of intentions, the reformers tried to move people from being what they saw as “nominal” Christians to “true” Christians. And we all know how well that worked. The persecutions and wars that followed left many parts of Europe in ruins and countless people dead. Those attempts to eradicate the weeds were at least part of the cause for the rise of secularism.

Why are we susceptible to this? Karen Armstrong, in her masterful book on Fundamentalism, notes that, no matter what the tradition, fundamentalists are operating out of fear. Fear that the weeds are going to choke out the wheat. She argues that they see themselves fighting for their very existence as well as for the triumph of their world view. Just looking at the U.S. she traces this back to the aftermath of WWI. Fundamentalists were afraid that the basic truths of the Bible were being lost because of biblical criticism, they feared more world conflicts, and they saw themselves living in the end times. They feared foreign influence seeping into the country from immigration – in that time, the fear was of Catholics. They feared that democracy would lead to mob rule. They saw plenty of weeds to be pulled out. But in the “conversations” that followed, the liberals, horrified by what they thought of as un-Christian and un-American, attacked with vigor, in turn trying to pull out what THEY saw as weeds. Have we not learned from that

that labeling each other and treating one another as weeds means, at the very least, that any real dialogue is impossible? And, while Armstrong is writing specifically about religion, her insights are broadly applicable to our responses to those who don't look like us, or think like us, or vote like us. Perhaps the best thing to remember here is that we too are sinners and we have to look past the log in our own eyes in order to see the speck of dust in someone else's. Simply put, sinners judging other sinners is a dangerous business.

There's a second point here and that's the caution about a rush to premature judgment. Have you seen the bumper sticker that says "Be patient; God isn't finished with me yet"? There's some wisdom there – a person can't be defined until their life is over. Only then, when there's no more hope or thought of change, can we say anything definitive and even then we won't have the whole story. There's a wonderful story about the American Red Cross gathering supplies, medicine, clothing, food and the like for the people of Biafra. Inside one of the boxes they received was a letter. It said, "We have recently been converted and because of that we want to try to help. We won't even need these again. Can you use them for something?" Inside the box were several Ku Klux Klan sheets. The sheets were cut down to strips and eventually used to bandage the wounds of blacks in Africa.

Although the parable makes it sound like there's a clean division between weeds and wheat, the truth is, just as we heard last week, that's we're all a bit of a mixture. A quick story about this mixture. Seems a fellow named Elias came down from the NC mountains, all dressed up and carrying his Bible. A friend asked him where he was going and he said that he'd been hearing that New Orleans was a great place – lots of free runnin' liquor, lots of gambling and some interesting shows. The friend looked at him and asked, "Well then, Elias, why are you carrying your Bible?" "Well," came the answer, "If it's as good as they say it is, I might stay over for Sunday." Each of us is that mixture, so, in making judgements, we need to be very careful about where those judgments are coming from. Richard Rohr, who has a center for Contemplation and Action in New Mexico, said once that the emphasis should be on contemplation. Deep prayer and intense self-reflection should come before action, he says. Otherwise, we can act, not out of love, but out of our own anger or frustration, projecting our unexamined "stuff", our own "weediness" out on to other people and then attacking them.

And, finally, the question about whether this parable says that we should be passive in the face of evil. A first reading might suggest that, but, again, reading all of Matthew, we can understand that passivity would be a mis-reading. While there is caution, certainly, and a reminder that we must always leave those final, ultimate judgments up to God, this isn't telling us that we shouldn't be doing good, nor is it telling us that we should acquiesce in behaviors that are clearly opposed to God's will. I remember a conversation in an ethics class in seminary that I think is helpful here: the professor asked what we thought Jesus would have done if he had come upon the robbers beating

the Jewish fellow who was later rescued by the Samaritan. That would have been a clear case of some “weeds” in action – what would Jesus have done?

And here I’m going to do something I’ve not before – I’m going to leave you to ponder that question – and hope you’ll get back to me with what you think.

Amen.