

**7 Pentecost, Proper 11, Yr. A
July 19, 2020
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

I'd like to concentrate on the Matthew reading this morning and begin by saying that I think there are four key points to be made. The first is that, like Pope Francis, we have to be willing to say, "Who am I to judge?" That is, we need to keep in mind the admonition, Judge not lest you be judged, or the further reminder of Jesus about being aware of the log in our own eyes before we presume to try to take the splinter from someone else's. So, be wary of judgement. The second is that we are NEVER in a position to judge another person's relationship with God. The third is that this scripture is NOT a call to be passive in the face of wrongdoing, and the last point is that we need to keep in mind our call which is to love, to love God and neighbor. I'd like to flesh out each of those points.

Let's begin, though, with a closer look at the Gospel. The weeds that are sown in the parable are called tares, or darnel. Apparently, this is not only a pesky plant, but it looks like wheat and so is able to hide out in the wheat. However, if it makes it through to the harvest, its seeds are harmful. An agronomist reading this passage would think waiting and letting it grow aren't very good advice. And indeed, Palestinian

farmers would uproot the darnel once or twice before the harvest in lieu of the waiting and then having to pick out the seeds. But Jesus is using the field to make a theological, not an agricultural point. In his telling of the parable, the wheat is doing OK even in the presence of the weeds. It's the laborers and their idea of how to proceed that would be the bigger problem. No, he 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 eradicate the bad, you'll destroy the good along with it, because they are intertwined.

So, there's the first caution – you can't always tell good from bad at a given point in time. A person who looks "bad" to us has, as long as that person is living, a chance at repentance and redemption. A good example of that is Oskar Schindler. Remember the movie, Schindler's List? Schindler was a German industrialist who saved over a thousand Polish Jews from the concentration camps in WWII. One of the people he saved said of him, "He was our father, our mother, our only hope. He never let us down." But if you saw the movie, you'll also remember that he had many vices. He was unfaithful to his wife, and a major partier. He was supposed to be a Roman Catholic, but was so in name only. He was a member of the Nazi party and his stated aim was to end the war with two trunks full of money. He began by exploiting the Jews

as a source of cheap labor. But...there was more to him than that and, as the war went on, he became appalled by the horrors of the Nazis' desire for a 'final solution' and at great personal risk he protected his workers from the death camps. He wasn't a saint – like all of us, he was a mixture of wheat and weeds. He illustrates two things: he perhaps started out going in the wrong direction but ultimately changed that direction. If anyone had judged him early in his career, the verdict would have been "WEED!" But not all that much later, it was clear that that would have been both premature and wrong – he was clearly WHEAT.

This weed/wheat dichotomy hearkens back to conversations we've had when we've talked about humans as being little lower than the angels – made of earth, but filled with the breath of God. And also carriers of impulses to do both good and evil. We, each of us, is a mixture of wheat and weed. We forget that at our peril. Life is often ambiguous and even our best motives are often mixed. All of us are sinners. There's a wonderful story of a man who 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 about New Orleans. Heard that there was a lot of free-runnin' liquor and a lot of gambling and a lot of real good and naughty shows. The friend looked him over and said, "But

Elias, why are carrying your Bible under your arm?" And Elias replied, "Well, if it's as good as they say it is, I might stay over until Sunday."

The second point I mentioned is that we can never judge another person's relationship with God. Only God, as we say in the Collect for Purity before every Eucharist, is in a position to know what's in someone's heart and mind, to know all our secrets and, therefore, only God is the judge. We put ourselves in God's place at our peril. I remember reading that, in the First Crusade, knights came upon an Arab village and slaughtered everyone there, assuming that they were the infidels – the weeds. It was only later, when they were turning over the dead bodies, that they discovered that their victims wore crosses – they were all Christians. It had never occurred to these European knights that Christians could be brown as well as white.

Sometimes we judge out of ignorance – not knowing weed from wheat. But sometimes we judge out of fear, fear that the weeds are crowding out the wheat, taking away the vital nourishment that belongs, but right, to the wheat. Karen Armstrong, who I've mentioned before, has written a book that explores fundamentalism in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. She notes that, no matter which tradition it is, fundamentalists operate out of fear. They see themselves fighting for their very existence as well as

for the triumph of their world view. Looking at the beginning of the fundamentalist movement in the US, she outlines the climate and conversations going on between fundamentalists and liberals after WWI. Fundamentalists were afraid. They feared that the basic truths of the Bible were being lost because of Biblical criticism; they saw more world conflicts in spite of the Great War which supposedly had been fought to end all wars; and they thought they were living in the end times. They feared foreign influence seeping into the US from immigration, especially Catholic immigration; they feared democracy would lead to mob rule. Literal Christians, on the other hand, were horrified by the fundamentalists' positions which they saw as un-American and un-Christian. So they attacked and "despite their Gospel of love and compassion, their campaign was vicious and unbalanced." They accused the fundamentalists of being traitors and of taking money from the Germans. They compared them to the Bolsheviks who were taking over Russia at that time and said that their apocalyptic theology was "the most astounding mental aberration in the field of religious thinking to date." In short, they labeled them as "weeds" and tried to eradicate them. The fundamentalists responded in kind. If we've learned anything since then, we've certainly learned that labeling and treating each other as weeds means that any real dialogue is completely impossible. Armstrong is dealing with

religion, but labeling and the desire for eradication of those that don't look like us, or think like us, or vote like us, isn't limited to religion. There's a range of behavior, from extreme partisanship in politics to ethnic cleansing in trouble spots around the world.

The third thing we need to think about is that a quick reading of this passage would lead us to think that passivity is what's being asked of us. Don't do anything, just wait. But I think that reading is pushing the parable too far. When we're confronted with situations of wrong-doing, or hurt, or suffering, we're called to do what we can to correct the situation. I think what Jesus would say here is the same thing that parents say to their children who are doing something wrong – I love you, but I don't like what you're doing. Actions can be wrong and harmful and we need to correct what we can, all the while not condemning the person, but leaving that judgement to God.

And that brings me to the final point, about remembering what we're called to do. We're called to love God and neighbor. And, in line with talk about not judging prematurely, there's a wonderful story about the American Red Cross gathering supplies, medicine, clothing, food and the like for the suffering 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 ever need these again. Can you use them for something?" Inside the box were several Ku Klux Klan sheets. The sheets were cut into strips and eventually used to bandage the wounds of blacks in Africa.

Jesus is clear about what his followers should be doing: feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick. In other words, loving. Sometimes it's hard to figure out the loving thing, but that doesn't excuse us from seeing and living out of that command to love.

A final thought. Remember the parable of the sower – the abundant sower, God. God's in charge. We're called to help by being God's agents, but we're not in charge. It's said that Pope John XXIII's night prayer went something like this. Who governs the Church? You or the Holy Spirit? Very good, go to sleep, Angelo.

We might want to adopt that prayer. Amen.