

## Pentecost 7A

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Sunday, July 19, 2020

Hard as it may have been at various points during this pandemic, I suspect most of us have looked for some type of silver lining in the midst of the chaotic and difficult cloud that has been the last 5 months. Whether it is a deeper appreciation for what we do have, to an awareness of who our friends really are, or to moments of random acts of kindness or grace amidst difficulty, we seek signs of hope in times of trouble. The power of spring bursting forth ever so slowly during daily walks from early April until late May was one of the aspects that I will remember from this time. The myriad shades of green that filled the woods and fields as seafoam green buds peeked from the branches of trees to the almost pastel green of early leaves breaking through to the lush deep woods green of leaves in full maturity. The slight and various gradations were a sight to behold.

Planting fields of grain possesses a similar characteristic of ever shifting hues of color. The light green of a wheat stem pushing through the earth as it begins to stretch to the sky changes to a medium green as the plant matures to mid-calf height, and before the stem and beard turn prairie yellow, there is the final stage of a dark green mature wheat stem. Yet, at the same time that the fledgling growth that promises to yield fruit sprouts, a competing vegetation--weeds--pushes through the soil seeking its own life. To a trained eye, there may be distinctions that allow one to discern wheat from the weeds. However, the varied hues of green ebb and flow between the wheat and weeds, and to the untrained eye, there is virtually no difference between them.

Thus, the landowner in Jesus' parable today is wise to delay weeding the field of wheat. Instead, he allows the wheat and the weeds to grow to maturity, where distinguishing between them will be much easier. The allegorical explanation to the parable that Jesus offers can be so very attractive for us to embrace. The description that Jesus provides is neat, clear, and unmistakable. The Son of Man sows the seeds. The field is the world. The good seed? They are the children of the kingdom. The weeds? They are the children of the evil one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil. And the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Cut and dried. No questions. And watch out if you are a weed! As the old saying goes, "Your ass is grass, and God's a lawnmower."

Which is, perhaps, the way that too many people read this text. It becomes a proof-text to consign others as children of the evil one--the weeds--and they will most certainly get what is coming to them! Meanwhile *we* are children of the kingdom--the wheat. It's so easy--and so dangerously tempting--to read this text as a confirmation of our way of life and a judgment upon those who do not believe as we do, or worse yet, who do not look like we do or whose lives--in

terms of sexuality, gender, race, ability--do not reflect our own. This, of course, is nothing new. As Elisabeth Johnson rightly notes about the first century community hearing this text, "Perhaps there were some overzealous 'weeder' in Matthew's congregation who wanted to purify the community by rooting out the bad seed." And then she presciently notes, "This seems to be a temptation for followers of Jesus in every age."

The temptation is to overstep our limits in our desire for clarity, grounding, and certainty, and to seek to play God in adjudicating who is in and who is out. Or who is friend and who is foe. Which is why the image of the wheat and the weeds growing together is so compelling. You can't tell them apart. Indeed, you may very well mistake one for the other. Thus, one never really knows when one is uprooting a child of God or the enemy. Furthermore, Matthew's use of the word enemies is important for our reading of this parable.

"Enemies" occur three other times in the Gospel of Matthew. The first time is in 5:43-44, where we are told to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The second reference to "enemies" is in 10:36. Here, Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them out as sheep among wolves, where "one's enemies will be members of one's own household." The final occurrence is in Matthew 22:24, where Jesus speaks of the prophecy of David with respect to the Messiah, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" (Psalm 110:1). All these references should give us pause in seeking a broad brush with which to paint others as the "enemy". For, in these instances, the enemy is as close as our kin and one for whom we pray. Thus, while we heed the teaching of the ultimate judgment, we must do so with a conflicted heart. If we actively seek to pray for those whom we dislike, and the enemy could be as close as our family, then why would we want any judgment.

Indeed, these several references resist efforts to turn "enemies" into nameless opponents on the other side of a great divide. The neat categories that we prefer of "Us" v. "Them" proves untenable. Life is more complex. And while ultimate defeat is assured within the text, lines are surely blurred as to who is whom in the narrative. Which is the very stuff of Lutheran theology. We recognize that we possess the potential to be both weeds and wheat. Or, as Luther noted, *simul justus et peccator*. We are both saint and sinner. At the same time. Sinner for we know we fall short of the mark that we desire for ourselves and God surely desires for us. And simultaneously saint because of what God in Christ has done and continues to do. If nothing else, the text tempers our urge toward moral superiority and moral dogmatism. Do we end up at a place of moral realism? Recognizing our vice as well as our virtue. Our transgressions as well as our faithfulness. Our complicity as well as our victimization. And the recognition that, ultimately, it is not our judgment. It is God's.

Which is the ultimate take away from this gospel. In our desire for control and certainty, it is too easy to develop categories by which we judge others. The camps of worthy and unworthy, sacred and profane, righteous and unrighteous, saved and damned are ultimately unhelpful at best and cruelly abusive at their worst. What we are invited into is to see the world through a lens where we struggle to discern one from another. The gifts, beauty, and sacred of the other are ours, as well as the limits, foibles, and vice. God invites us not to be judge, jury, and executioner of our neighbor. Rather God, ever and always, invites us more fully into the spreading of the word amidst the field of the world for the life of the world. And when we do this, we, perhaps, are less concerned about pulling up the weeds and more concerned about tending to the growth of the seed and the wheat. Focus on partnering with God in the field of the world. Let God worry about the end.