

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
July 20, 2014
6th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11A

The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text-- Genesis 28:10-19; Matthew 13:24-30

Immediately following the parable of the seeds and the soil that we read last week, comes another, this one more difficult, perhaps, because it has to do with weeds growing in the midst of the wheat crop—indeed, weeds sown surreptitiously, in the night, by an enemy. Often interpreted as good and evil mingling together.

Jesus' listeners would have understood this earthy, familiar story very well. The landowners would know about losing profit. And the tenant farmers would relate to the possibility of greater devastation—the lost crop resulting not only in the lack of food to feed the family thus hunger and maybe even death from starvation or malnutrition but also in no way to pay the rent. How would those people have understood this parable? Most of Jesus' audience would have been the landless peasants, so they might be reassured—not only on a literal level about the harvest—but that eventually God would separate the good and the bad and bring justice and an end to their oppression by the rich, the enemy.

Theirs might not be our world but, I imagine most of us have had some experience with weeds.

Mine illustrates my ineptitude when it comes to gardening and landscaping. One summer, I decided to plunge into a particularly dense tangle of plants at the perimeter of my front yard. There was no evident pattern, so I just had to start yanking, not knowing if I was pulling up weeds or something that I might want to keep. First I uncovered a brick border beneath the roots and then began to notice which root systems were which. After several days of backbreaking work with pitchfork and fingers, I emerged with soil packed beneath my fingernails, hands pricked by thorns, and encounters with wriggly worms. But the patch looked great, and I was proud!

Less than two weeks later, I looked out upon the yard to find a carpet of new growth. The weeds were back despite my careful tracing down to the roots. Did an enemy sneak in during the night to undo my work? Well, no. It was actually a garden hose-sized source of growth buried like an electrical cable that had spread from one end of the yard to the other. My weeding efforts had been more like pruning—wakening the master root to start sending out ever more shoots!

The weeds in our parable today were a bit different from mine but just as tenacious and even more pernicious. For one thing, the weeds sown secretly by the enemy so closely resembled the good wheat plants that they were not noticed until they grew up enough to bear grain. By then their roots were so entangled that they could not be pulled out without also extracting the wheat and assuring that there would be nothing at all to harvest. So, the farmer said to leave them together. At harvest time they would be separated and the weeds burned.

As in many of the parables, Jesus tries to give us a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven. “The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to this”—*not* the Kingdom of Heaven *is* such and such but the Kingdom of Heaven *is like* such and such. There are other phrases sometimes used: Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls the Kingdom of Heaven “God’s dream for humanity.” Matthew’s main focus was on the Kingdom and the judgment at the return of Christ. For in his time, it was believed that this would occur within peoples’ lifetimes, so there was an acute urgency to getting things right and being ready. Tutu and others move us beyond just thinking about the Kingdom of Heaven as the end time or afterlife. It can begin to be realized right here—God’s dream in *this* world. A world of love and peace and reconciliation. If humanity can receive God’s love, let it change us, and then live that out in our lives, we can move closer to it bit by bit, step by step.

And that is one of the shocking twists in this parable. For Jesus doesn’t say, “the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.” **Period.** Jesus says, “the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to

someone who sowed good seed in his field.” **Semicolon.** “but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.” The Kingdom of Heaven, God’s dream for humanity has both good and bad seed. Growing together! Not exactly the perfect, peaceful, dream that we have imagined! Think about it for a minute! Not even the Kingdom of Heaven is pure.

We know that we are not pure—we are mixtures of the good and the not-so-good that constantly struggle within us. Our lives, too, are mixtures. There are joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures, health and sickness. And our churches—more the “hospital for sinners” than places where the holy and good gather. Places, we hope, where we can encourage and support each other in our growth of faith, in our ability to receive God’s love and promise, so that we can not only better handle the challenges of our lives but can become more Christ-like in our day-to-day living and relationships with others in the world.

This parable tells us that the bad seeds can injure or destroy the good. We know that bad influences can have a devastating on us, on our children, on our world. Do you think the opposite is true as well? Could good seed change the bad? Could good role models or a caring community make a difference?

The other shocking twist is that we cannot just eliminate the “weeds” and live happily ever after. Just as with the field workers in the parable, it is our instinct to dig in and begin pulling out the weeds, rooting out the evil, and tidying things up. But we are told to wait—that to do so will cause more damage than allowing the growth to continue.

The thing is, we aren’t always very good at telling the difference between the wheat and the weeds, the good and the bad. There are times when they look very much alike. Times when an act that seems good turns out to have negative consequences. Times that things go awry even with best of intentions. Things that are so complex that they defy solution. It seems, too, that the more certain we are that we have the right answers, the more likely we are to mess up.

Think of the countless examples in human history where humans have assumed

their right to judge others. In Matthew's community, it was an animosity between those following Jesus and those rejecting him. Right now, today, this week, we have tragic and heart breaking examples: the terrible conflict in the Ukraine leading to the deaths of nearly 300 innocent airline passengers. The child immigrants at our borders—are they immigrants trying to illegally claim better advantages in the US or are they refugees as much in danger of death and murder as others from the Middle East? Is it compassionate to send them back home or to receive them and possibly save them from certain death? And the decades long violence in Israel/Palestine. Who is right? Israelis who maintain that they have a historic—and biblical—claim to the land (debatable) and understandably don't want the Hamas rockets launched into their towns? Or Palestinians, forcibly removed from the lands they had occupied for centuries into settlements behind walls, stripped of rights and basic necessities? Who is the enemy? Hamas using terrorist techniques? Or Israel with its superior fire power? I have my opinions. We all have our opinions. But they don't untangle the strands.

No, we humans are not so good at telling the difference between the weeds and the wheat. That is God's job. We seem much better at sowing the weeds among the wheat. So, maybe that's why they must grow together, even in the Kingdom of Heaven. God's economy is not like ours. God's choices are not like ours.

Just look at who is called by God! Today's Hebrew scripture reading is one example. Jacob is on the run, aided and abetted by his mother Rebecca who loves him more than his twin brother, Esau. His life is at risk because he has just tricked his elder brother, Esau, out of the birthright and the blessing that was rightfully Esau's. And yet, it is Jacob who has the dream. It is Jacob, not Esau, who is chosen to pass on the promise given to Abraham by God. It is Jacob to whom God says, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land' for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." How outrageous is that? And yet, that is God's choice. Not the choice we would think fair or just.

Episcopal priest and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells us that weeds can sometimes be useful. “Sometimes the weeds wake the wheat up and remind them who they are.” It is often when things get most challenging that people come together in solidarity to respond, or feel the need to reflect on what is most important. “When the field gets very, very messy,” she says, “the search for the Sower becomes a necessity, not a luxury, and good seeds that once toasted in the sun taking everything for granted remember that surviving as wheat is going to take some effort.”

That effort is not about focusing on removing the weeds, though. That might just make us more weed-like ourselves. It is about bearing fruit—being living witnesses to God’s love and care for us. Make no mistake—this is not about sitting passively rather than speaking out against injustice. There are many teachings in scripture that call us to care for others, especially those who are oppressed and in need, and doing so is how we bear fruit.

All of this—the waiting, the trusting that all will come to good in the end—may not feel very satisfactory in the midst of what is going on in our world. Maybe this bit of gardening wisdom will help. I recall reading somewhere that the key to a weed-free lawn is not about pulling the weeds or spraying them with chemicals, but growing the strongest, healthiest grass you can. So, we sad mixtures of wheat and weeds—as individuals, as the church—need to be about bearing the best fruit we can, with God’s help. That is a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, what God’s dream is for humanity. A people who have received God’s love, have let it change us, and strive to live it out every day. For we can bring God’s dream one step closer, assured that in God’s time, the wheat will prevail!

Amen.