

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 20, 2014
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Brook Thelander

I Samuel 23:15-18
Psalm 86:11-17
Romans 8:18-28
Matthew 13:24-43

Today is one of those days where the Gospel lesson makes me wish that I had called in sick or taken a vacation day. There is so much going on in this text that any 15-20 minute sermon will certainly not do it justice. However, I'm not ill, and it's too late to take a vacation day. So here we go.

Today's Gospel is another parable, and like last week, it's a parable about sowing seeds. Last week you recall there was one sower in the story; this week, there are two. Last week, Jesus offered an allegorical interpretation of the parable to his disciples. This week, he does so again, although among the many things about this text that confound me, one is that Matthew injects two additional parables (the mustard seed and the yeast) into the narrative before he has Jesus interpret *this* parable.

Both parables offer some perspective on opposition to Jesus and his mission. In this week's story, we are offered a glimpse into the presence of evil in the world (and, perhaps the church).

Jesus, as you know, lived in an agrarian society, and so many of the parables he told are rich in agricultural language and imagery. This story is no different.

Normally, there are things in Jesus' parables with which his listeners would easily and readily identify.

But there are some things in this story *that would really puzzle those who heard it*. Some of its features would leave people scratching their heads, precisely because they *challenge and contradict normal human experience*. It is these features that provide clues to the parable's interpretation, in my view. I will attempt to limit myself to one of those features. So, let's get started.

The story reminds us that the Reign of God is similar to a farmer who sows good seed in his field, but in the night an enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. The farmer's servants see what's happened, and thinking that their master planted only good seeds, they say, "Your field is full of weeds."

The farmer replies, "An enemy has done this."

And here is where we have a challenge to normal human experience. When my wife was a teenager, she worked two jobs in the hot Nebraska summers. She detassled corn, and when she was not detasseling corn, she was hired to go to the soybean fields and to remove weeds from the bean fields.

Those of you that enjoy Gardening, let me ask you: do you spend a fair amount of time "weeding" your gardens? And is it fair to say that you "weed" your gardens frequently, sometimes even daily? What happens if you don't keep a

serious eye on your garden? What happens if you aren't vigilant about "weeding" it?

Well, this was also the common practice in first century farming. When weeds were discovered growing in wheat fields, they were immediately rooted out. So when the farmer's servants here in this parable discover these weeds growing in their master's field, they immediately ask him the question you and I would ask: "Should we get out into the field and pull those weeds up?"

Before their master answers, they have already taken two or three steps toward the field, with their weed-pulling equipment in hand. Imagine their shock, then, to hear these words: "No, don't weed that field. Leave things alone. Let it all *go*, and let it all *grow* until harvest time. At harvest time, the reapers will sort it all out."

What a shock to the system that must have been! It becomes even more shocking once Jesus gives his explanation of the parable, because our natural human impulse in many cases is to "root out" evil. In fact, Scripture calls on us to resist evil, not only within ourselves, but also in society. We are to *do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.*

We are to care for widows, orphans, and those whom society easily marginalizes and overlooks. We are to fight for justice, we are to fight against the exploitation and oppression of others, especially those who are powerless. We are

to affirm the image of God in all people, and we are to fight against everything that seeks to diminish and destroy that image.

Let me ask you something this morning: Have you ever witnessed something happen in the world that so disgusted you, so broke your heart, so angered you, that you silently wished you had the power to just blow in like a tornado and give the people who caused that pain their just deserts?

Who among us has not at some point wanted to take matters into our own hands when we see rampant evil and injustice in our world? For some time now I've had to limit myself when it comes to listening to or watching the news, because it's too easy for me to end up angry and ready to take matters into my own hands. I often find myself saying, "my God, what is this world coming to?"

(The answer to that question is: this world is coming to an *end*, but that's for another sermon.)

I know that Scripture calls on us to resist evil, both within ourselves and in society. But here, in *this* text, **Jesus calls on us to trust in God, to "let go," and to leave matters in God's hands.**

What is going on here?

Well, biblical texts were not written in a vacuum. Biblical texts were written to specific people who were part of specific faith communities, and who had specific needs in their lives as they lived in the real world.

As one of my professors used to say, in typical Kentucky Bluegrass fashion: “biblical texts always scratch some particular itch.”

This particular parable is unique to Matthew. He is the only Gospel writer to include it. So I asked myself: “What might have been happening in the faith community to which Matthew writes that makes Matthew tell this story when no one else does?”

I discovered that the faith community that Matthew addresses was marked by brokenness, by schism and division. Some scholars believe that there were persons in this church who were overzealous “weeders.” That is, they were intent on purifying the church by “rooting out” the “bad seed” and undesirable elements from the church.

This parable (for me) now began to grow some real teeth. The temptation to “weed out” evil and undesirable persons from the church is a perennial one. Even today we have instances in the church where people are engaging in what could legitimately be termed a “weeding frenzy.” It is playing out right now in congregations and denominations, where some are determined to “root out” anyone who does not agree with the “right” interpretation of Scripture, liturgical practice, or stand on a particular issue.

And it is also very easy for those same people to pronounce judgment on people outside of the church – on people of other faiths -- declaring them with zealous certainty to be destined for eternal damnation.

Perhaps, then, Matthew tells this story of Jesus as a word of caution to people in the church who are intent to rid the church of its “bad seed.”

There are at least two reasons for this caution from Jesus. First, to use the language of the parable, rooting up the weeds *now* will do damage to the crop of wheat.

Second, again using the parable’s language, it is very difficult to tell the weeds from the wheat. The term Matthew uses here for “weeds” is the term that most likely means “darnel” or “cockle,” which was a noxious weed that closely resembled wheat and was plentiful in Israel. *The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident only when the plants mature and the ears appear.*

Jesus seems to make clear that we cannot be entirely certain just who is “in” and who is “out.” In fact, he mentions at least four times in Matthew’s Gospel that God’s judgment about these matters is going to take many by surprise (cf. 7:21-23; 8:11-12; 21:31-32; 25:31-46).

The danger for us, and for many in the church, is that we can get to a place *where we presume to know with certainty the difference between “weeds” and “wheat.”* Into those situations, and to those kinds of attitudes, Jesus says: “The

Reign of God is like a farmer who planted seed in his field, and when the weeds began to grow his servants said, ‘shall we take care of the weeds?’ And the farmer said, “no, let it go, and trust that it will come out alright at the harvest.”

One last observation, if I may be permitted. As I thought this week about Jesus’ parables, and about *this* parable, a thought occurred to me. It seems to me that the Church of Jesus Christ has always been at its best when we’ve been *Subversives*, not *Crusaders*.

Who knows, maybe that’s why Matthew sandwiches the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven in between the beginning of *this* parable and its interpretation.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, come with faith. The whole creation may be groaning and longing for God to put things right, but be assured: God IS putting things right. Trust Him. Leave to His wisdom the decisions about *how it’s done and who is in or out, and who gets what, when*. Receive the grace he offers you, and go forth rejoicing, bearing fruit.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.