

Sermon Proper 11 Year A 2017

Isaiah 44:6-8

Psalms 86:11-17

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Listening to the parable of the weeds and the wheat I am reminded of the contrasts between agricultural practices in Jesus' day and agriculture today. Parables, like this found only in Matthew's gospel can sound dated. Farming practices have changed the images that fields of wheat bring to mind. Today, fields of wheat are surprisingly monoclonal with seldom a weed in sight. Even if there were an enemy, they might not have much success sowing their weeds today given the herbicides that keep the wheat fields pure and productive. But such a powerful story is worth our time to consider it carefully.

We may find ourselves experiencing feelings like the servants of the householder who upon seeing the emerging weeds ask if the master wants them to pull the weeds, to purify the field. That is a not uncommon desire for us. When we are confronted with imperfections, weeds in our society, one of the first responses is to search for a way to purify, to bring order out of what strikes us as disorder. The same may be seen in religious circles, people who are different or perceived to be threatening may bring out that desire to purify. While that response of clearing out the weeds seems to come so easily, almost naturally, the householder rejects the attempts to remove the weeds for at least two reasons. First, gathering weeds is not without risk to the rest of the crop. Separating and pulling the weeds inevitably has the potential to harm surrounding plants.

Quite a bit of the criticism that Jesus attracted from the religious leadership was due to his association with those deemed unattractive, unworthy, or a threat to religious purity and practice. Jesus may be addressing such concerns in this parable. It is never desirable to purify a population and attempts to do so always bring harm.

But there is a second reason that the householder gives and which Jesus emphasizes in his interpretation of the parable. Perhaps more importantly separating the weeds from the wheat is not our responsibility. The harvest is God's responsibility, not ours. Our responsibility is to promote growth.

When the disciples and Jesus left the crowds they were able to gather in a home. The disciples, as was often the case, were puzzled by the parable and asked Jesus to interpret the parable for them. They wanted to move from metaphor to reality. What

does the parable mean in their lives? This is the question we find ourselves asking concerning parables as well. What is their meaning for us today?

Speaking for myself, seeing or noticing those who are different from myself is hard for me to resist. You see one of my personality traits is that I am intuitive. By that I think it means that I arrive at insight quickly. While that is one of my personality qualities, it is not necessarily always a benefit. Because for me, frequently this leads into judgment. I can just glance at someone and begin judging, without any knowledge of the person or their life story. Unfortunately, this is not a quality of discipleship. Being quick to judge is just one of my weaknesses.

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God contains saints and sinners, righteous and unrighteous, good and evil. In the world in which we find ourselves, secular and sacred aren't natural divisions. We are all in community together.

So, is Jesus saying that we simply have to accept any behavior or difference and just do the best we can, trusting that in the end God will make things right? We don't want to make the story too simplistic. We still have responsibilities living in community.

First, I think Jesus is encouraging the disciples and us as well to be cautious when it comes to labelling groups as weeds and as somehow outside God's love and concern. Because this has been the root of immense evil over time. Looking through the lens of history we can find innumerable examples of harm caused by prejudice and mistrust of those who are different. Whether that difference is based on religious belief, racial identity or ethnic identity, or more recently sexual orientation and gender identity, such labelling and the marginalization that it supports can bring great harm. Yet, at times we must make distinctions between groups that can be tolerated and lived alongside and those whose goals cannot be tolerated such as those of terrorist groups like ISIS or racist organizations. We must be clear in opposing groups who do not support the advancement of the common good.

So we must be cautious when it comes to looking down on groups. So too, we must be cautious about judging individuals too quickly as well. Now, Matthew is not opposed to discipline in the community. Live and let live doesn't mean live and let others take advantage. This is the difficult part. We live in community with hopes that all may thrive, those we love and agree with and importantly everyone else as well. But it does not mean that discipline and control aren't necessary.

That is why I find the passage a bit troubling. Because there is a certain amount of paradox in allowing people to grow and develop as they see fit, yet at times vigilance and discipline are called for.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the 20th Century theologian, preached a powerful sermon on this passage. In that sermon he noted the times when we are called to make distinctions. Listen to his insight.

Niebuhr said, “How curiously are love and self-love mixed up in life, much more complexly than any scheme of morals recognizes... There is a puzzling aspect to judgments about self-love or ambition. At what particular point do we think egotism so excessive that it becomes obviously corrupting?” He continues, “We know certain people to be monstrous egoists, but can we put our finger on the spot where this mixture of love and self-love, which we all have, turns into monstrous egotism? We do have to make our judgments, but we cannot be exact in our moral measurement.”

“... Here we have to violate the parable, and provisionally make judgments and say, ‘This form of self-interest must be checked.’ Or, ‘This form of self-interest must be balanced by other interest.’ Otherwise we will not have justice if the powerful man simply goes after his interest at the expense of the weak.”

Judgment is called for as we live in community together. Some individuals and some groups must be limited and controlled. But we do so only after significant reflection so as not to run roughshod over anyone.

So, we are called to live in community together. There is no sacred world divorced from the secular world. There is just this one community, Lynchburg, where we find ourselves together. And Jesus wants us here working together for the common good. Working together as disciples of Jesus to create an environment where all can flourish. Wheat and weeds, ordinary and extraordinary, saints and sinners. And we must get along together. We must look out for one another. We must resist the desire to judge too quickly. Instead, we are to focus on our life and our connection and what God calls us to do.

God is intimately connected with each of us. We are known as our opening Collect for Purity acknowledges each time we gather for Eucharist. (“unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.”) Fortunately, our relationship with God does not rest upon our initiative. As Paul reminded us, we live our lives in hope. And as hopeful as we are, God is even more hopeful. God is patient and close by as we grow and develop into the children, young persons, and adults that God hopes we will become. Our past is not necessarily prologue to our future. The God who knows us intimately loves us beyond our failings and betrayals.

Our job is to foster community, not judge between one another. Perhaps a story might illustrate this. The story is of a family holiday gathering. The youngest son was bringing his girlfriend home for the holidays. His older siblings were married and would all be home as well. Everyone was looking forward to the weekend. The first evening

started off a little rocky. It didn't seem like the new girlfriend was making a very good impression. The family retired for the night with a sense of uncertainty in the air.

The next morning as the mother was preparing breakfast before the youngest son and girlfriend appeared, the siblings were gathering. The mother told them she had a revelation to share. Everyone listened up. Last night she said that she had had a conversation with God. It turns out she had been mistaken about her role and the conversation had clarified it. She needed to share this information with the rest of the family. "Yes," she said, "it turns out that I had the wrong impression. I thought I was on the selection committee but it was made clear to me that I am on the welcoming committee."

From there, the weekend went well and the son and his girlfriend got along with everyone.

So too in our lives, we aren't the selection committee either. Despite our seemingly obvious strengths in this area, that is not God's call to us. In life, our most important role is that of the welcoming and thriving committee. We are to work together with those whom God has brought into our lives, working for the common good of all.