

Pentecost 10, Proper 11A
July 20, 2008

RCL
Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-11,22-23
Romans 8:18-25
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

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Here in mid-July we have another garden parable to examine for our learning, another story of farming spoken by Jesus who stands in a boat out a little way from the shore in the Sea of Galilee, speaking to the great crowd of people on the beach.

Last Sunday we read what Jesus says just before this, of the sower, most of whose seed did not fall on fertile ground and came to no good result. Yet God sees to it that there is good soil to receive his Word, which will prevail.

This time, in this parable, Jesus himself is the owner of the field who plants the seed, and what he plants falls on good soil and flourishes. Still, when his servants (that would be us, who follow in his way) when his servants look around at the growing wheat, they discover that it is not the only thing growing and they ask, with no small amount of concern, "Where did all these weeds come from?"

It has been a wet summer so far, with trees and flowers flourishing, and grass staying green far longer than in most Ohio Julys.

But, of course, when the plants thrive on the rain and sunshine, so do the weeds. Predictably, the weeds are growing even more heartily than the flowers and vegetables these days. In fact, maybe that's the definition of a weed. Anyway, those who garden find themselves asking, with the slaves of the householder in our story, "Where did all these weeds come from?"

Surely the owner of the field didn't plant these. No, it's pretty clear in the story that he did not. An enemy, who would sabotage the goodness of a healthy field of wheat, that's who sowed the weeds. Though God himself did not put them there, the thorny, unwanted, troublesome plants spring up just the same.

There's nothing difficult about translating this parable into real life. Most of us know some weeds, thorny ones that hog all the sunlight, that undermine our root systems, that try to steal all the soil's nourishment from plants that aspire, at least, to be healthy wheat. Whether these were planted by some evil force or just appear on their own, there's no way to tell, but we have all seen that in the midst of the blessings of God's creation there are those that work to disrupt the good.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans characterizes the whole of creation as groaning inwardly, groaning in labor pains, while we wait for God's kingdom to come. It feels like that sometimes, like the world is in an agony of pain from fear and insecurity, from an unfair balance of riches and resources, and that all that is good is crowded out by the evil weeds of terrorism, war, greed, and the quest for power.

What can we do? What is Jesus' teaching about what we should do? The details are different in our time but the people to whom Jesus was speaking knew about fear and insecurity and inequity and the quest for power, too. How did he teach them?

"Do you want us to go and gather up the weeds?" the servants ask in the parable, and Jesus, the landowner, says "No. Let both the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. Then the reapers will gather the weeds and burn them. And the good wheat will be gathered into my barn."

Why is it God's desire that the weeds should be left to grow along with the good plants until the harvest? Barbara Brown Taylor offers three reasons in her collection of sermons entitled, "Bread of Angels."

First, the servants are not skilled enough to separate the good from the bad. In pulling up the offending weeds they may unknowingly pull some of the good plants. But none of the healthy wheat must be lost. This is the same Jesus, the shepherd, who, when one of his sheep is lost, leaves the 99 to go and search for the one.

This is the widow who sweeps her house looking for the lost coin and rejoices in finding it. God does not want any of the good wheat to be destroyed. God cares for all that he has created. He isn't willing to risk the welfare of the wheat by letting his servants determine which plants should be pulled up.

Taylor uses as an example the fact that in one of the first Crusades knights from Western Europe stormed through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land and killed everyone in sight. It was not until later, when they turned the bodies over, that they found crosses around most of their victims' necks. It never occurred to them that Christians came in brown as well as white. God weeps when his servants decide which plants to uproot.

A second reason the owner of the field tells his servants not to harvest the weeds is that they (the weeds) may turn out to be useful in the end. In first century Palestine there was little lumber or coal with which to make a fire. The weeds could be burned to provide a fire to bake the bread the people made from the wheat, thus serving some purpose.

We can't imagine actual weeds becoming good wheat but we do know that repentance and conversion are possible in human beings. The Apostle Paul is the prime example. He who persecuted the Jews and hunted them down to kill them, as a loyal soldier of Rome, underwent a radical change in his life through Jesus Christ and became one of his most devoted followers and preachers of the gospel, the one who first brought Christ to those outside the Jewish faith. What, in fact, would the church have been without his leadership and his eloquent, convincing arguments for following Christ? What if God had allowed the evil weed that he was to be torn up before Jesus changed his life?

Barbara Brown Taylor's third reason why the "boss" as she puts it, said "no" to the question of clearing out the weeds, is that we who would pull them up run the risk of becoming more like them ourselves. One of the provoking tasks of weeds is to get the stalks of wheat so worked up that they begin to act prickly and aggressive and nasty just like the weeds - poisonous, even. And in fact they succeed sometimes, bringing out the worst in the good plants so in the end you can hardly tell the difference.

There is a classic short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer - I don't recall the title - about a generous and good man who lived in a village of small-minded and hateful people. Every day the man would go to a street corner and preach to whoever would listen about the goodness and generosity of God. One day someone stopped and said to him, "Foolish man, why do you continue to preach in this way? You will never change the people of this village." "I know," replied the man, "I don't speak to change them. I speak to keep them from changing me."

The owner of the field, Jesus, the Boss, said "no." Do not pull out the weeds. The angels of God will do that at the time of the harvest, on the day of judgment. The angels will know which to burn and which to gather into God's barn.

It's not a command to be passive. It doesn't mean to do nothing about the weeds in the world. It's not an easy job to be good wheat, to endure amid the weeds and to bear good and useful fruit, especially in the face of opposition to God's creation. It takes courage and strength to stand up against injustice and to question the quest for power. But if we want to be wheat this is what we're called to do.

This parable is not a command by Jesus to be passive and just take it from the weeds. It is a command, though, to be patient and to trust God to know what to do.

We wait in hope. The Apostle Paul says it's meaningless to hope for what we can already see. Trusting in God, then, we hope for what we can't yet

see - for peace and security in the world we live in, for justice, for the fields of golden grain that God has planted, for the promise of seeing some weeds change their ways.
Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria