

Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30,(36-43)*

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(Proper 11)
Year A

WHEAT OR WEEDS?

Oh, you Lay-Weeders!! You faithful workers who meet every Monday. You are so conscientious and caring. You're dismayed by those unsightly weeds that keep cropping up. You work diligently to keep ahead of them before they crowd out your lovely flowers. It must be something in your DNA—because the servants described in today's gospel shared the same concern.

However, this is one time we don't want you to take the gospel literally. We trust you to know the difference between weeds and flowers.

It was a little more difficult for the servants in the parable. Commentaries identify the weed in the story as darnel—a weed common in Palestine, a weed that is related to wheat and looks very much like wheat, but is poisonous and can cause blindness and even death if too many of its seeds get mixed in with the grains of wheat.

This thirteenth chapter of Matthew is a succession of parables—kingdom parables. “The kingdom of God can be compared to”—a mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure, a seeker of pearls, a net let down into the sea—and today, good seed and bad seed. Jesus has moved into the prow of a boat and is addressing the crowd from there. And he speaks of ordinary things--familiar things-- but with a twist. Kingdom business is NOT business as usual. Kingdom wisdom is NOT conventional wisdom.

Probably many of the audience that day were peasant farmers who were familiar with the agricultural practices of the time. And so, the landowner's instruction in the story was startling. “Let them both grow together until the harvest.”

The audience knew that the best method was to cull out the weeds as early as possible and often repeatedly, so that at harvest they did not have to separate the seeds by hand. Darnel closely resembles wheat in the early stages, but an experienced farmer can distinguish the two by the width of the leaves. Because the grains of darnel carry a strong toxin, it is not wise to harvest it together with the wheat. The mixing ruins the quality of the grain and poses a health hazard.

Moreover, separating the two at harvest time is very difficult. The preferred course of action was to pull out the weeds as early as possible—and repeatedly if necessary.

Weeds and wheat – let both of them grow together until the harvest. For the Christian community of Matthew's time, this story had specific meaning. There was the concern of this young Christian community to keep itself pure while living in an evil world. Also, there were many different sects-- and many different teachers were offering a host of different ideas. Weeds, if you will, among the good seed.

Today these same questions plague us.

How do we deal with weeds?

How do we confront differences of doctrine and opinion?

How do we encounter divergent ideas and teachings?

What do we do about those whom we consider “good” or “bad”?

How can we mere mortals make ultimate judgments over other human beings?

And so we ask: Weeds or wheat? Wheat or weeds?

But the bottom line of this kind of thinking is THIS versus THAT or THEM versus US.

We divide the world into all kinds of opposites—

black and white----- young and old,
male and female----- insider and outsider,
weak and strong----- gay and straight,
alien and citizen----- sacred and secular,
clergy and laity----- winners and losers,
wheat and weeds.

In the worst case scenario, the “other” becomes the enemy. And we know what happens when this kind of thinking becomes institutionalized. We have racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism and homophobia, to name a few.

What or who do we accept and what or who do we reject? (I think both GAFCON and Lambeth are wrestling with this.) What would we weed out? Maybe the “thems” for us are Muslims, Iraqis, Iranians, Democrats, Republican, liberal Christians, conservative Christians, “good old boys” or feminists.

LET BOTH OF THEM GROW TOGETHER UNTIL HARVEST.

An unusual use of this parable of the wheat and the weeds comes from the time of the Protestant Reformation. During the sixteenth century in Germany, many paintings of biblical events decorated the churches, both Catholic and Lutheran. The parable of the wheat and the weeds was a popular theme. These paintings often reflected the bitter feelings between them.

For example, in St. Mary’s, now a Lutheran Church in the town of Wittenburg where Martin Luther lived and taught, there is a painting that interprets today’s reading. The scene is set in the middle of the night and the Lutheran reformers are sleeping by the side of the field, which is the church. The pope and other Catholic leaders are sowing weeds in the Lord’s field. No doubt in THEIR minds who are the poisonous plants.

But there are other paintings in Germany, too. In Catholic churches, artists have portrayed the pope and hierarchy sleeping by the side of the field. Luther and other reformers are the enemy, sneaking in by night to sow weeds in the Lord’s field, the church. So the story can be seen in both ways.

Weeds and wheat—they and us—us and them.

Matthew may have been clear that there are only two kinds of people in the world—the wheat and the weeds. But we have encountered both kinds—even in our very own selves. Last week, Russ said we don’t know what kind of soil we are. This week I wonder—am I wheat or weeds or a mixture of both, maybe some kind of a hybrid.

Hans Christian Anderson’s story of the Ugly Duckling illustrates what happens when we call others “weeds”. The duckling’s siblings said, “If only the cat would get hold of you, hideous object.” In time, however, the ugly duckling grew to maturity and found acceptance as a majestic and graceful swan.

We don't write anyone off. For instance, if I were doing the judging, I would certainly not choose Jacob as one whom God would call and bless! He was a trickster, a cheat, and a liar. He tricked his brother out of his birthright for a bowl of soup. When his father Isaac was dying he lied and tricked this poor, blind, weak old man to gain the blessing he'd bartered from Esau. Now he's a fugitive, fleeing from the wrath of his brother. And yet, God's grace comes to him. God's **Will** to bless him was not contingent upon Jacob's good character.

We have to look beyond our small perception of reality to appreciate the big picture. God sees the whole picture. God's generosity is again beautifully illustrated in today's gospel. Just as the farmer was willing to wait for the harvest to separate the weeds from the wheat, God gives each of us time to grow, to change, to be transformed by grace, to become who we are called to be. God sees the whole picture and finds and appreciates our potential.

Over and over in the Bible we are told that God's ways are not our ways and the mind of God is vastly different from our own minds. Might that mean that God may know more about this salvation business than we do? Might it mean that we can learn from other people's experience of what is holy. Are we secure enough in the love of our God to recognize that other people may have authentic experiences of God that just might be different and valid?

CAN WE GROW TOGETHER UNTIL HARVEST?

The GOOD NEWS is that a loving and forgiving God will be the final harvester.

WHEN THE TIME COMES FOR THE GREAT HARVEST, SOME OF THOSE GATHERED INTO THE BARN WILL SURPRISE US! AND I EXPECT WE WILL SURPRISE THEM!

* NOTE: I purposely ignored v. 36-34, because it is commonly accepted that these verses were added by the writer of Matthew and not Jesus' words.