

"Growing up Together."

Gen. 28:10-19; Ps. 139:1-12, 23-24;

Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

Rev. David E. Young

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost, July 20, 2008

Today we encounter another of Jesus' parables involving wheat and weeds. Last week we heard the Parable of the Sower, the story about the good seed that was broadcast hither and yon - on the path, in the rocks, among the weeds and in the fertile soil.

Today's parable has a more sinister edge to it. The good seed has been sown in good soil. The Master's farmhands have done a good job of cultivating the land and caring for the crop. Everything that could be done in the light of day has been done. "Well done, thou good and faithful servants!" is the cry heard as the sun sets in the West.

But, the next day it is clear that something has gone awry. Weeds have grown up among the wheat. The workers come to the Master and demand an explanation. Their first question is about the quality of the seed the Master used in the first place: "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?" (It's interesting to me to note that they were comfortable enough in their relationship with the Master to dare to question him).

They then learn the news that an Enemy has done this in the middle of the night and then disappeared.

What is left is a mixed crop of good and bad, useful and useless, worthy and worthless plants. Outraged, and eager to put things right again, the workers ask for permission to deal with these weeds.

The Master, however, cautions them against taking things into their own hands and rushing around to set things right. He warns them that their efforts to "fix" things might actually cause more harm than good.

Taken at face value this text says rather clearly that we should not be doing anything about the evil in our midst. Just let it grow up alongside the wheat and in the last judgment God will send Angels to sort it out. It seems we ordinary workers aren't competent to distinguish wheat from weed.

But, as much as we want to be guided and informed by the Bible, I'm afraid to say to you young folks and others: this text really isn't a good response when your parents ask you to weed the garden!

Still, doing nothing about other things doesn't sit very well with us. We aren't going to ignore injustice and oppression and harmful, hateful behavior. We aren't going to sit idly by while we see others being abused, nor are we going to "take it" and be perennial victims of abuse just because we have warped Jesus' words to "Turn the other Cheek" into some kind of Masochistic Mantra.

Rather, we are going to strive to follow other Biblical teachings and try to "do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8) We are going to stick up for the underdog and address issues of social concern and strive to make a positive mark on the world around us. This is what Christians do. It is certainly what Presbyterian Christians do.

We're familiar with the words uttered by the English politician and philosopher Edmund Burke who said: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing."

We know the way in which a policy of appeasement toward Hitler's grasping for power in the 1930's almost spelled doom for the Free World.

And, after the United States was savagely attacked on September 11, 2001, being told to "Just let things be and do nothing" certainly wasn't an acceptable response for many.

But now, almost 7 years after 9/11, we're not sure whether the response we made to that evil act was well-advised. If this parable had been the basis for foreign policy, the Master in this story would probably question our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere. He might raise a note of doubt as to whether our Homeland Security measures are really an effective way to clear the home field of evil or provide for our ultimate security. He might wonder whether the security fence in the Southwestern States does anything other than hem us in and hamper our efforts to speak about justice in the courts of world opinion.

But, is this parable encouraging pacifism or political inaction? It may seem to on one level. In fact, the text seems to suggest that the Enemy who sows the weeds at night and then disappears doesn't need to do anything else. His work is done. He can count on the Children of God - the Children of the Light, all of us earnest and eager folks - to get all flustered and run around with such a sense of urgency and anxiety that we will do more harm than the Enemy ever could do on his own.

We may have made a powerful military response to evil, but are our efforts to put things right causing greater harm than good? If this text were the basis of foreign policy and nation relationships it would give us serious pause.

I believe however that Jesus is speaking to us in our human relationships and our life together in the Church. That is a big enough field of vision. When we extrapolate Bible parables into political programs we can run into trouble. It is enough to take this parable on its own terms in the context of small town Palestine, or small town USA, or Chapel Lane for that matter.

"Master," the slaves ask, "do you want us to go and gather the weeds?"

The Master's response is one of patience and restraint. "Let both grow up together". The weeds, in this parable at least, do not have any power to affect the good crop on their own. When the harvest time arrives that's when the sorting out will occur.

And the ones doing the sorting will not be field hands like ourselves, but the Master's own Angels - ones who are perhaps better equipped than we to tell the difference between the weeds and the wheat.

For certainly, this is an important aspect of this story: good and evil are often hard to distinguish. The bad guys don't always wear black. The devil doesn't always have horns and a tail and a shiny red cape.

Sometimes we make the wrong choices, thinking in our righteous indignation that we are standing up for God. A seminary

professor once quipped: "How do you defend God? You defend God like you defend a lion - - you get out of his way!"

It would be so easy if we could clearly tell the good from the bad and could be assured that every effort to weed out evil would lead to greater good. But this parable reminds us that life isn't that simple.

There aren't any perfectly good people and few patently and totally evil people. Whenever we demonize our opponents or make them into caricatures of warped humanity, the Innocent Ones get caught in the crossfire.

Not only is this important to remember about the "Weeds" out there, but it is also important to remember about the "Weeds" in here, inside of us: the less noble parts of ourselves, our inclinations toward sinful thoughts, words and deeds.

Each of us is a mixed up garden with some wheat and some weed. It takes a skilled hand and careful eye - one much more keen than our own - to separate the good in us from the bad.

So, isn't it good to know that God is patient and loving, willing to pour out grace and mercy and to withhold judgment while we grow and develop as Christ's disciples?

I do not want to imagine what life would be like if someone other than God were in charge of determining what was good "wheat" in me from what was bad "weed".

Besides, I'm certain that each of us is on someone else's list of pernicious and destructive weeds! Whose "weed list" are you on?

Friends, there are weeds and wheat within each of us. Thankfully, God is the one who sorts it all out. So we don't have to be anxious for the day when the final separation happens, because we know that the God who has walked among us in Jesus of Nazareth has told us not to be afraid of life or overcome by evil because he has already overcome evil through the amazing power of his sinless death and glorious resurrection.

This same Jesus is also the one who tells us workers in the field to keep doing what we do best: planting good seed, cultivating it and watering it and caring for the crop that is sure to come.

And this same Jesus is the one who cautions us to avoid doing what we lack the skill to do: making ultimate judgments on what is good wheat and what is bad weed, taking things into our own hands and thinking that by our own efforts we can secure the Lord's harvest.

And so we must be cautious in our approach to the weeds around us and within us and have a care for the way we respond to the words of the Master and let the teachings of this parable soak in and instruct us in the mysterious ways of God's kingdom.

Following Jesus' command to "Love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves should give us more than enough to do as we joyfully remember our salvation and tirelessly work to proclaim the justice, love and mercy of God in Christ.

Let us pray.