

Sermon for 23 July 2023

St. Luke/San Lucas Vancouver WA

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

Search us, O God, and know our hearts;
Try us and know our restless thoughts.
Look well whether there be any wickedness in us
And lead us in the way that is everlasting.
Amen.

Please be seated.

As Mother Amy noted last week, we are in the season of agricultural parables. Parables are stories with a message, told to illustrate a particular point, to help people to see, to remember, and to put in practice something they might not have noticed otherwise.

And that approach definitely worked for me with this particular parable. Over the years, I've heard literally hundreds of sermons. And I remember bit and pieces of some. I remember that there are some preachers who seemed to speak more to me—and others perhaps a bit less so. I hope (admittedly optimistically) that I have been able to take away something from each of the sermons, from each of the teaching, to incorporate into my life. But there are very few sermons where I can remember the exact passage, the exact occurrence, even what the pastor was wearing that day. The sermon, on this passage, this parable of the grain and the tares, is one of those few that, years later, I remember.

I was probably in junior high or early high school at the time, sitting in the pew with my sister as my mother helped out with the nursery. It was a big deal to be allowed to sit alone, without adult supervision, and I knew that my mother would receive a report on our behavior from some "helpful" person in the congregation if either my sister or I misbehaved in any way, so there was definitely some pressure there.

Our pastor at the time was a big man, with one of those great radio voices, that could fill the room. He had the ability to bring you right into the story, to make it feel like you were right there in the middle of the action, to make it seem like he was speaking directly to you. And on that day, he began by reading out the first part of this parable as if it were a radio production: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well."

Then he paused, looked at us sitting in the pews, and said, "And here, today, in our field, we have some grain growing strong. But, my friends, we also have weeds. Big weeds. Strong weeds. Weeds that are strangling our growth. Yes, my friends, we have wheat, but we also have weeds!"

Now, he went on with his sermon, and given that sermons usually lasted 45 minutes or more, he probably said a lot of good things. But I don't remember that part. He lost me at the weeds.

Because at that point, I began to mentally start dividing the congregation around me into two teams—the wheat and the weeds. Now, remember, at that time I was young, devote, and more than a little self-righteous and arrogant, so I knew I was on team wheat. No question. I was sure that I was going straight to the heavenly storehouse with all the other faithful wheat stocks.

However, as I looked around me at some of the people in the pews, I wasn't so sure about them. That person there, maybe had some weed in them. And that person in front of me, squirming a bit in their seat, was likely considering what kind of fruit would pop out on their stalk. And, of course, that person across the aisle, the one I knew was struggling with a bunch of different things, they were definitely in the weed category, heading directly for the furnace of fire, with lots of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is a common, and of so human, approach to this parable. We humans like to sort things, to put them in some kind of order. Have you ever seen little kids playing with toys, lining them up in a way that makes sense to them and then throwing a tantrum if anyone dares to put them in a different sequence. Yet, that interpretation, that approach to the parable which divides a congregation into wheat and weeds, good and bad, can be very damaging, both at the individual and at the community level.

At the individual level, for those who are confident in their faith, those who are sure they are wheat, such an interpretation can give rise to arrogance, to self-righteousness, to prideful behavior. That's certainly where I was, focusing not on what I could do to deepen my faith, but rather on who among the congregation would soon be feeling the heat. Not one of my better moments.

And this approach is also damaging to those who were not as confident in their faith, for those who are struggling, for those who have doubts. I could see it in the uncomfortable shifting in the seats, in the expressions on people's faces, as they did a mental inventory of their lives, asking themselves if maybe they were the weeds, maybe they were the ones sown by the enemy. Maybe their struggles with addiction, with depression, with other challenges of life meant that they were not ever going to reach that heavenly grain silo.

This approach to the parable, one where we begin separating ourselves into wheat and weeds, into good and bad, into saved and damned, this approach is also not healthy for our congregations. It can lead to divisions among communities, as people begin to mentally place themselves and others into various categories—definitely wheat, definitely weed, still to be determined. It can lead to the creation of cliques, of in-groups, of clubs, as we all scramble to be identified with, to hang out with, the wheat and not the weeds.

All of these are very human responses to the first part of this parable, and all of them can be very damaging to community. Since Jesus' parables were intended to instruct us; in the words of our Psalm, to lead us in the way that is everlasting, I think we need to take a look at the rest of that parable, because there is surely more to the story.

"The slaves said to him (the Master), Then do you want us to go and gather them (the weeds)?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

Now remember, in this parable, we are the seeds. We're not the slaves or the Master. We're the seeds. And guess what, the seeds aren't the ones who get to decide who is the wheat and who is the weed. Think about that, the seeds aren't the ones who do the separating, who do the judging. That is not our job. That responsibility belongs to God.

And that message is much more consistent with the Jesus we see throughout the Gospels. The Jesus who, in the Gospel of John, when the Pharisees brought an adulterous woman before him, trying to trick him into either condemning her or going against the law, responded with, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." The Jesus who, in the Gospel of Matthew, asked his followers why they were so focused on the speck of dust in their brother's eye, when they had a huge fencepost in their own. The Jesus who, repeatedly, encouraged his followers to love one another, not to judge one another.

And what a relief for us. We don't need to worry about seeing into the hearts of others, about judging and maybe making a wrong decision with dire consequences for ourselves and those around us. Jesus has given us a straightforward task—we are seeds and we are supposed to grow. We are dig our roots deep into the soil of the Scriptures, taking nutrients from its teachings. We are to unfold our leaves to soak up the energy and strength of the Sun to guides us. And are to stand tall, producing fruit that will feed others.

And our growth will occur in community. We are not lonely trees, growing on the edge of a cliff. We are agricultural plants, growing together in a field with other plants. Sharing our space, our resources, our strength with each other. Growing tall together. Celebrating each other's joys and standing together in the face of struggles. And yes, Jesus recognizes that not everyone in the community is a wheat plant. Then, as now, there are some weeds in the mix. Weeds that can soak up some of that lovely sunshine, that can siphon off some of the nutrients. Weeds that can irritate, that can make our growth path harder. Yes, there are weeds in the field as well.

But here's the good news—that's not our problem. We don't have to worry about the weeds. We don't have to run around, expending our energy on identifying which plant has potential and which is a problem. We don't have to try to pull out those weeds by

the roots. In fact, if we do that, we risk damaging our own root system, making us weaker as well.

Instead, as Mother Amy pointed out last week, our job is to grow. To deepen our faith. To love our neighbors. To do justice. To love mercy. To walk humbly with our God. To grow ourselves and, to the extent we can, to assist others in their growth as well. We can leave the judging, the separating and dividing, to God. Our task is to grow. Amen.