



“Weeds Among the Wheat”

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, July 17, 2011

When first-time visitors slip into a pew for our Sunday morning worship, they come with a number of anxieties. They have practical worries such as: Will I look out of place? How will I be treated? Will I do something to embarrass myself? Along with these practical worries, they have serious spiritual anxieties. Writing in the journal, *Christian Century*, Lutheran pastor Peter Marty points out that many are on the verge of giving up on Christianity because they have seen plenty of narrow-minded hypocrites in the church, and they have heard their quota of baloney-filled sermons.

Many are especially on guard for signs of “arrogant certainty.” Spiritual confidence coupled with humility can be inspiring, but claims of absolute certainty in knowing the truth about God can raise a person’s anxiety level several notches. And if the pastor or congregants claim absolute certainty regarding the ultimate destiny of others – who will be welcomed into God’s kingdom and who will not – it is a surefire signal to run for the exit.

Marty poses the question that troubles many of us when we hear people who are too cocksure of who is saved and who is lost. He asks: “Why is it that those who tout this divide with such certainty always seem to be speaking as members of the “in” group and never consider that they might be on the outside?”¹

This morning’s lectionary reading from the Gospel of Matthew appears to be one of those passages that speaks of a divide between those received into God’s eternal kingdom and those condemned to the outer darkness. Jesus tells a parable that begins in a similar fashion to last Sunday’s passage, The Sower and the Seeds. Only in today’s parable, the focus is neither on the Sower nor the abundant crop that results. Today’s parable tells of an evil one who slipped into a farmer’s field under the cover of darkness and sowed weeds among the wheat. As the wheat began to grow, weeds popped up with it.

When the farmhands witnessed the weeds they were puzzled, so they marched up to the farmer and said, “Master, didn’t you sow good seed in this field? Where did these weeds come from?”

The Master responded, “An enemy has done this.”

The farmhands quickly volunteer to come to the rescue. They say, “We will straighten things out. C’mon, boys, let’s jerk out those weeds!”

“Whoa,” says the Master, “That won’t work. If you yank out the weeds, you’ll pull up the wheat along with it. Let them grow together until harvest time. Then, I’ll send out the reapers with instructions to bind the weeds in bundles to be burned, and to gather the wheat for the barn.

Like the parable of The Sower and the Seeds, this parable comes with an attached interpretation. Jesus explains to the disciples that the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The good seed represents the children of the kingdom and the weeds are the children of the Devil. At the end of the age, the angels will collect all causes of sin and evildoers and pitch them into the fire. Then, the righteous will shine like the sun in God’s kingdom.

It sounds clear cut, doesn’t it? There is good and there is evil. There is the good young man, Harry Potter and there is the evil wizard Lord Voldemort. There is Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Batman and the Joker. Cowboys in white hats and bad boys in black hats.

We know this story. It is obvious who is wheat and who is weed. The wheat is in the church and the weeds are those who fail to follow Christ.

In Jesus’ day, kings were powerful and ruthless. They demanded obedience and enforced it with the sword. When Jesus announced that a new kingdom was dawning – the kingdom of God – he was announcing the beginning of a revolution that would overturn the kingdoms of this world.

Some Old Testament prophets foretold a day when God would set the world right. The oppressed would be set free, the hungry would be fed, hostilities would cease and peace would reign.

Jesus announced that with his ministry, the long awaited revolution was now underway. Those who were suffering were delighted to hear of the revolution, but those who were benefitting from the status quo were less than enthusiastic.

According to Matthew, those who followed Jesus and supported his revolution were the wheat. They were right with God and they did what was right to others. Those who opposed him and resisted his revolution were the weeds. They were sorely lacking in the justice and mercy department.

Key to understanding this parable is to remember that Matthew wrote his gospel for a beleaguered minority who were trying to remain faithful in the face of persecution. He was assuring them that despite their current suffering, and what appeared to be the triumph of the enemies of Christ, there would be a day of reckoning when God would sort it all out and reward those who remained faithful.

In our day, we can quickly jump to false conclusions if we rip the parable out of its original context. We run the risk of imagining that we possess more insight than is humanly possible as to who falls into the categories of good and evil. Haven’t you known someone you thought was a wonderful human being until you discovered his dark side? And haven’t you known dubious characters who surprised you by their acts of compassion?

Russian writer and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was arrested, sentenced to a forced labor camp and eventually exiled from the Soviet Union. He witnessed cruel acts and experienced harsh punishment. He could have easily written about clear distinctions between people who were good and people who were evil, but instead, he wrote these words: “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between (social) classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart... This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. Even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained; and even in the best of all hearts,

there remains a small corner of evil... If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”²

Is not this the reason that Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”? Our motives are not always pure and we do not always do what is right. We must turn to a greater power in order to be forgiven and delivered from evil.

Rather than handing us a justification for declaring who is wheat and who is weed, this parable “is a cautionary tale, warning us to beware of the weed pulling impulse – the moral need to improve the field based on our own limited judgment.”³ That is why the farmer prevents us hired hands from yanking out the weeds. He knows our perspective is skewed and our judgments are often faulty.

Moreover, when we take the full gospel story into account, we see a much more complex situation than simple stock characters that are either wheat or weed. In fact, rather than avoiding the weeds, Jesus sought them out; rather than condemning, he was in the business of transformation. He was constantly healing the ill, finding the lost, extending forgiveness and turning lives around.

A colleague tells what happened in her home state of Georgia a few years ago when a state representative stood up and spoke to the legislature. The elected official said that during the 19th century, “all of his ancestors owned slaves. His great-great grandfather had fought for the South in the Civil War. He and his third-grade classmates had cheered when the news was announced in his classroom that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. His college fraternity had ostracized six of its members when they discovered they were gay. He told of the African-American woman who had raised him, changed his diapers, and taught him more than anyone else the difference between right and wrong. He told them how one day when he was a boy leaving for school she had leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. And he had averted his head because he assumed that a white boy should not allow an African-American woman kiss him. He spoke of the shame he had carried over that incident. He said, ‘On the day we buried that magnificent woman, I pledged to myself that never again would I look in the mirror and know that I had let prejudice or hate or indifference to negatively impact another person’s life.’ Then he said, ‘I finally figured out that the only way we are ever going to make progress is when people take a stand against injustice. I urge the House to pass this hate-crimes bill to protect racial minorities and gays.’ And so they did.”⁴

There are weeds lurking in the best of us and wheat to be discovered in the worst of us. May we resist the temptation to rush to judgment, knowing that God can burn away the weeds in each of us and harvest what is good in all of us.

NOTES

1. Peter W. Marty, “Betting on a Generous God,” in *Christian Century*, May 17, 2011, p.23.
2. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956*.
3. Jeanyne Slettom, “Lectionary Commentary,” on the *Process and Faith* website for July 20, 2008.
4. Joanna Adams, “Why Can’t We Pull Up the Weeds?” *Day1.org* February 19, 2006.