

Proper 11A – July 20, 2014

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

By The Rev. Kevin Bean

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells a parable about a field mixed with both wheat and weeds, and about the owner of that field who would not let his workers uproot the weeds from the wheat until the final harvest. Weeds among the wheat—an apt description of our fields, as it were—whether those fields are our workplaces or neighborhoods, our churches, the political economy, the foreign policies of our nation or family of nations, or the interior landscapes of our own psyches.

A “weed” of course, is a relative term, meaning a kind of plant that, in the wild, you might appreciate, but which you wouldn't choose to have in your yard, mixed in with the grass or flowers or vegetables that you have chosen to cultivate. Each “weed” is nonetheless a special species of plant which, if it went extinct, would somehow diminish God's creation. There are people, too, with whom we live and work who are as beautiful as, say, Queen Anne's lace or a honeysuckle, but who are somehow out of place in the neat and tidy rows of relationships we try to keep. And we know others who are thorny like a bramble or who are rather irritating like poison ivy. And then there are some who are as toxic as deadly nightshade, or as the plant generically translated as “weed” in this gospel parable, but which is “zizania” in the original Greek text (or in the Latin “zizanium” or “lolium”) and more correctly translated into English as “darnel” (or “tares” in the King James Version). Darnel is a grassy plant that resembles wheat and is often camouflaged alongside wheat while wrapping its roots around and through the roots of the wheat plant. The seed of the darnel however is quite different than a grain of wheat; and if the wheat flour has the seeds of the darnel ground with it, the result will be bread that will sicken you with a serious stomachache. And if enough darnel seeds are ingested, this has a poisonous effect, causing blindness and even death. That's the image Jesus puts forward in this parable: wheat and weeds together, and deadly weeds at that.¹

In this parable, those tending to the field ask whether the owner would like them to remove the weeds found among the wheat. Before the days of herbicides, farmers dealt with weeds by uprooting them by hand early in the growing cycle of their crops, sometimes repeating the process several times, so that at the end of the harvest it would be easier to sort out the grain or seeds. But in this parable, the landowner instructs his workers to hold off pulling the weeds—for fear that they will uproot the wheat along with the weeds—until the final harvest, when everything would be harvested and separated out for their particular use.

But such an approach would make it so much harder to sort the wheat from the toxic darnel in the final harvest! Nonetheless, the landowner in this parable can tolerate the mischief of these weeds because he does not doubt his ability to make it all right in the end. Yet, doesn't such a strategy seem too passive an approach to sorting things out, to cleaning up the field? Nine years ago, Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister at the time, delivered an impassioned speech in response to the London bombings that had occurred

in July of 2005. At one point in his speech, he addressed the religious and political ideology behind those and other acts of terror. He stated, “Its roots are not superficial but deep...We must pull this up by its roots.”ⁱⁱ Today’s gospel parable raises a question about the wisdom and practicality of such comments made by him and many others in recent times; as we are now thirteen years into rooting out the enemies in Afghanistan, and eleven years into doing supposedly the same in Iraq. There’s a lot of that that’s gone on in many quarters—“let’s clean up the field,” different groups have said in recent years, intending to sort the wheat from the weeds, the “children of light” from the “children of darkness,” the Tutsis from the Hutus, the Serbians from the Albanians, the Protestants from the Catholics, the Palestinians from the Israelis, the Sunnis from the Shiites, the true believers from those who have strayed from the true faith, and on and on. Whether it’s through genocidal “ethnic cleansing” or attacking the enemy while creating many more casualties among non-combatantsⁱⁱⁱ, many are trying to do what the workers in this parable suggested—but they are doing it without permission or authority from the Landowner (with a Capital “L”). The Landowner has a different approach. And there’s wisdom in the Landowner’s method. First, not only are wheat and darnel hard to tell apart. As well, uprooting the darnel by itself is no easy task, since it intertwines its roots with those of the wheat; and so pulling out the darnel even if you know it’s darnel, may result in pulling up the wheat before it’s ready. This says something of the Landowner’s concerns about both our inability to judge the wheat from the weeds, and about the vulnerability, the tenderness of the emerging wheat, amongst those in our fields of work, and worship and in the wider world. As followers of Christ and people of faith, we are given today Jesus’ parable to grapple with.^{iv}

Apparently the Landowner in Jesus’ parable seems more interested that things grow than that they do so in a pure or clean or uniformly tidy field. Letting weeds and wheat grow together may in fact be useful to the growth of all. In this parable, everything is useful—the grown wheat for making bread and the weeds for fuel to bake the bread. In a messy field, in a mixed community, we can’t just take everything for granted nor ever assume that one person or group is useless.

From the time of Pentecost, the Church itself has been a mixed multitude. Unfortunately, because of a variety of forces at work, a number of churches have organized themselves more as homogeneous safe havens. But as St. Paul spoke of the Body of Christ “where the eye cannot say to the hand ‘I have no need of you’” (I Cor. 12:21a), so we today cannot say to others, for example, “We have no need of you on the Right” or, “we have no need of you on the Left.”^v Now, the Landowner, God, is the most merciful judge, whose sovereignty over all means that all are ultimately spared.^{vi} Sure, God is a God of justice, and justice must be done. But justice, if it is justice and not something else, does not preclude mercy and, in fact, makes mercy possible. As Frederick Buechner states, “the one who judges us most finally will be the one who loves us most fully...The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one.”^{vii} Jesus’ judgment in the end is not hellfire and brimstone, nor “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as Matthew in his gospel is so wont to portray with his add-on interpretations of this and other parables of Jesus. Instead, the judgment from Jesus is that stated from his cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Forgiveness is God’s greatest show of strength. It’s not about us or God

sorting it all out now, or even later, but about a mixed multitude within the embrace of an all-just and all-merciful God. God allows a messy field, a mixed crop, whether we like it or not. And God asks of us to labor in that mixed field—in the church, in the community and world.

Again, this is not a call to passivity or complacency. Instead, it is a call to stretch and grow and to engage in this hard work of reaching out and across to others in the messy mix of it all. As any of us who have tried to love our enemies know, that's about as hard a work as anyone can do. But what God the Landowner knows is that the best solution to others' limitations is to sow your own good seed and grow your own good fruit, especially if *any of us* have been labeled as a "weed" at some time or other! And who among us hasn't? And if all we do is try to attack the weeds, we run the risk of turning into weeds ourselves, becoming full of prickles or poison—good people who turn into bad people trying to put the bad people out of business.^{viii} Our job as workers in the mixed fields God has placed us in and calls us to is not to give ourselves over to the enemy by consuming ourselves with the destruction of the weeds, but rather to mind our business as it were—our business being the repair of the world as instruments of God's love, justice and healing—*seeding* more than *weeding*.^{ix} And, as Barbara Brown Taylor states, "If we give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest—the harvest, the reapers, the fire—all of it."^x And as I've said before, toiling in such *mixed* ground, we may then begin to find some new *common* ground, and in that, even *holy* ground.

ⁱ See Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 147.

ⁱⁱ Speech by Prime Minister Tony Blair quoted in *The New York Times* (7/16/05)

ⁱⁱⁱ ...or attempting to purify the field by less hostile means such as racial profiling and other forms of discrimination

^{iv} That reminds me of a modern twist to this parable. I want to speak about a business practice of a rather notorious company—no, I'm not talking about Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, at least not today; rather, it's Monsanto, whose main product initially was a weed-killer. This herbicide was so effective that it would kill anything, both weeds and the good plants surrounding the weeds. So, the company decided that along with producing their weed-killer, they would also get into the business of genetically modifying the desirable plants that were being grown by farmers so that those crops could withstand the herbicides they were also selling to these farmers. This caught on and many farmers around the world were buying both their patented genetically modified seeds as well as their herbicides. But, like the part of this parable where we are told "...while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away," lo and behold, some of the genetically modified seeds on one farm, by the help of wind or birds, would end up in the fields of other farmers who had not previously purchased such seeds. The company now pursues those farmers whose fields their patented seeds have somehow dropped into, and forces the farmers to either become new customers of theirs or Monsanto closes those farms down by suing them. I'm telling this story not to slam Monsanto's genetically modified seeds, as the verdict is still out on whether or not they are good and healthy for human and animal consumption. Rather, I'm telling the story because of the injustice perpetrated by the company on thousands of small farmers who are being "weeded out," as it were, by Monsanto. Ironic that it's the *farmers* who are being treated like weeds.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of an example of this from an earlier day: "in one of the first crusades, knights from western Europe blew 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." – See Barbara Brown

Taylor, Bread of Angels (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 148. See also Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), pp. 15-20.

^v As Henri Nouwen put it, “We spend an enormous amount of energy making up our minds about other people. Not a day goes by without somebody doing or saying something that evokes in us a need to form an opinion about him or her. We hear a lot, see a lot, and know a lot. The feeling that we have to sort it all out in our minds and make judgments about it can be quite oppressive.” – see Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. March 9 entry.

^{vi} By being with others not like us who have different perspectives and identities from our own, we are called to seek and find and grow into our own identities which can then, with a clearer sense of ourselves, love all the more our neighbors who are not like us, as we love ourselves all the more. Our reading from the Wisdom of Solomon also assigned as a reading for this Sunday relates well to this gospel parable. This text on strength and kindness subverts popular myths of power. Power is not for throwing your weight around. On the contrary, the more power one has the less one uses it.

^{vii} Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 48.

^{viii} ...or in the case of Monsanto, good people who turn into bad people trying to put good people out of business.

^{ix} As William Sloane Coffin stated—and this bears repeating—“True, [if we love the good,] we have to hate evil; else we’re sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we just become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many.” (William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 20). Or as St. Augustine put it, “Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself” (Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, A Passion For the Possible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 22).

^x Taylor, Bread of Angels, *Ibid.*, p. 150.