

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for July 19, 2020 ~ Proper 11A

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Like so many of the parables, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares has a rural, agricultural setting. It has to do with a farmer who planted wheat but found his field full of weeds. It seems an enemy had come under the cover of darkness and secretly sowed the weeds. The weeds in Jesus' parable are probably a well-known Palestinian plant called darnel. It is a plant that is almost indistinguishable from wheat until it reaches maturity. Then, its dark fruit stands out boldly against the golden grain of the wheat. The darnel is poisonous and after removal it is bundled and used for fuel.

The weeds presented a difficult problem, for to remove them would damage much of the wheat. So the farmer instructed his servants to let the good grain and the tares grow together until the harvest when the weeds would be sorted and bundled and the wheat would be gathered into the barns.

The commentators have had difficulty in determining all the implications of this story and there have been controversies throughout the history of the Christian church over its meaning. In the fourth century the Donatists and Augustinians argued over it. It provided substance for a heated argument between Luther and Beza during the Reformation. At the birth of the nonconformist movement, this parable was a proof text in the Erastian and Arminian controversy. Early in the last century it showed up again in the fundamentalist modernist debate. Even today it permeates our attempts to understand issues of human sexuality and is a bone of contention between many self-described evangelicals and just about anybody who disagrees with them.

This parable is an illumination of the nature of life in any age. Finding weeds in the wheat is an everyday experience and everyone has to deal with the difficulties involved. It speaks rather directly to the question of how God's People should deal with the weeds in our life together and in our individual lives. In its simplest form and in its original setting, it seems obvious that Jesus is speaking of the necessity of patience and the danger of premature judgment because appearances are deceiving.

For instance, what appears to be good today may, in time, reveal itself to be bad. What the servants leave in the field as wheat may at harvest time turn out to be the poisonous weed. Jesus' parable warns that the danger of premature judgment is that time may ultimately reveal the good to be evil.

The patriarch Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and tricked his father into giving him the blessing to which Esau was entitled as the elder brother. That seemed good to Jacob at the time. However, it enraged Esau and when we encounter Jacob in today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures, he is fleeing for his life.

The opposite is also true: What appears today to be bad, may, in time, reveal itself to be good. To remove the darnel now may mean removal of much good wheat, thus jeopardizing the wheat crop. The parable of the wheat and the weeds warns us that separating the two prior to the harvest jeopardizes the wheat because much wheat will be mistaken for weeds and fall to the reapers blade.

Esau's unregulated outburst at his brother was a bad thing for Jacob because he had to leave his home and family. However, the resulting exile gave Jacob the opportunity to mature spiritually and psychologically

so the Spirit of God could work in his life to prepare him for to fulfill the purpose God had in mind for him.

And that is the main point of the parable: God holds back the hoe because God knows humanity doesn't know how to use it. Judgment belongs to the Lord of the harvest and to no other. Only God knows when the harvest is and until then the wheat and the weeds are to grow side by side.

God's way seems to be a combination of certitude and patience. For those who are grounded by faith in God, there is given the capacity to wait and to grow. There are times when this is a precious gift because life is full of experiences which test our human strength. We need to understand that in God's good time, all things will be revealed for what they are. The farmer in the parable could see in his mind's eye the coming of harvest time when everything will be judged by its fruit.

Jesus' parable exhorts patience, not judgment. If you will think about this you will see how we are liberated by this parable. In the time we save and with the energy we conserve when we quit playing God's role as judge, we can devote our attention to the task of living and proclaiming the gospel.

Of course, the parable has an inner application as well: it teaches us to be patient with ourselves and to permit God to oversee the harvest of our lives one by one. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead told the story of a young girl whose family contracted a terrible illness. This girl literally slaved herself away caring for them and supporting them and trying to comfort them in their pain. After the last one had died, she herself, weakened by the tremendous strain and hard work, contracted the disease. As she lay dying in the hospital, a very sanctimonious woman from the church came to see her. She reminded the young girl of her poor attendance record and proceeded to question her beliefs. Dissatisfied with the vague and uncertain answers she was receiving, this woman asked the girl what she expected to do when she stood before God on the dreadful judgment of God, how could she possibly answer? And, the girl, in a weak voice filled with pain and fatigue, said, "I'll show him my hands." She held out her hands and they were the hands of an old woman, made that way by the grinding toil love had required of her. As she loved others, she had learned the very important lesson of loving herself. Even in the face of another's premature judgment, she had an inner confidence that spoke of her ability to be patient with herself.

God holds back the hoe because he knows his children are too hasty with it. God alone sees the heart. God alone can judge fairly. God's realm is made up of many kinds of people and many kinds of experiences. So, God says to those of us who work in the field God has planted, "let the wheat and the weeds grow together, until the harvest."

When we can order our personal and corporate lives by this divine principle, we create a climate that is safe and redemptive. In such a climate lives can be touched by the Spirit of God and transformed. Faith can take root and grow and produce good fruit. And, what in our lives is undesirable can be sorted out by the One who loves us and desires the very best for us. That's the sort of climate in which Jacob's wounded ego was receptive when God opened the heavens to him and revealed a divine purpose for his life. Every time we baptize someone, we promise that we will be responsible for creating just such a climate for them one that is safe, one in which they may come to faith, and, in time, lead others to faith. It is a context in which the Holy Spirit bears witness with their spirits that they are children of God and fellow heirs with Christ Jesus. Such a promise, such a climate, lends authenticity to the rather bold invitation, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You – PERIOD"