

Leave the Weeds alone - Matthew 13: 24-30

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 20, 2008

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Last week our Gospel lesson spoke to us about **planting seeds**. Today our reading focuses on **pulling weeds**. Jesus addressed the concerns of an agricultural society. No wonder the urgency of texts like this are often lost in suburban America where we hire **Chem Lawn** to green our lawns. I know there are exceptions but most of us limit our gardening endeavors to the production of a few tomatoes and the odd zucchini, assuming the resident groundhog doesn't get it all.

To be truthful, many of us have difficulty when we hear Jesus' parables because we are *agriculturally challenged*. I am. My wife Shannon was raised on a farm in rural Indiana and she knows the difference between soybeans and sorghum. I can recognize corn in mid-summer if the light is right! I now know what a **butterfly plant** is, but there was a time when I did not. I thought it was a weed and I cut it down. Shannon's displeasure was matched by my own chagrin when I had to purchase the replacement from Waterloo Gardens!

God's will has a way of mocking our presuppositions. We like to think that the higher we aim, the more successful we will be. We raise our children with the words - *do your best* - resounding in their ears. The unspoken expectation is that *the best* pays off. We basically endorse the Protestant work ethic: *work hard, be honest and thrifty, and you will be successful*.

The only problem is that it doesn't seem to work that way. Those who work the hardest do not always gain the rewards.

- Parents raise their children with love and care, leading them through positive experiences, only to have their children choose to root their lives in the soil of a totally alien value systems.
- The best things do not go to the best people. Good people work hard for employers only to lose their jobs after many years of faithful service and for no fault or failure on their part.

A wonderful old hymn, revived in the musical **GODSPELL**, speaks of the "good things" of life:

*We plow the fields and scatter, the good seed on the land
But it is fed and watered, by God's almighty hand.
All good gifts around us, have come from heaven above,
So thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.*

But we do not receive only good gifts - life is also made up of *bad gifts*. There appears to be **another hand** which sows **bad seed** into our lives. We may not agree on what it is, but we must agree that it is. *An enemy has done this!* was the teaching in our parable in answer to the question of why evil undermines our hopes and expectation.

Which takes us to the heart of our Gospel lesson. When the workers in our lesson asked the owner if he wanted the weeds removed, he wisely told them, *Leave the weeds alone*. Initially that sounds crazy. We like to make a separation of good from evil, true from false. We want to draw a line .. take a stand for what is proper and acceptable. Many feel that this is the quintessential duty of the Church .. to identify what is moral and upright and to purge out all deviations. But we do not receive a call to purify the Church this morning. We receive just the opposite.

Leave the weeds alone. If you start pulling out the weeds you will do more harm than good. These are hard words for us to hear because they appear to advocate a passive, indifference in the face of destructive forces. Our best instincts call us to improve the environment, to protect loved ones from danger, and to displace anything that would compromise our happiness or security. But we are told, *Leave the weeds alone*.

Our lesson reminds us that the **realization of human potential** is more important to God than the **eradication of evil**. We tend to be more obsessed with removing what does not belong. We want to act swiftly to destroy what we consider to be wrong. We are slower to see the potential for good all around us. **But God loves good more than God hates evil**. God is like a teacher who cares more about how students learn than whether or not a few students are cheating.

One of the greatest challenges we face as Christians is **the challenge to be tolerant**. How easy it is to draw a narrow circle that **excludes** those, whom we do not like, those who are different from us. How more difficult it is to remember that we have been called to draw very wide circles that **include others within our fellowship**.

Our Gospel lesson is a call to **patience and tolerance**. There will be a judgment. Of all the evangelists, Matthew is most clear on that issue. We, however, are not called upon to be the judges. Judgment will come at the end of time. But patience should not mean tolerance for injustice in the place where we live. Jesus is forever encouraging us to live lives of goodness and to demonstrate a better way to deal with people.

Leave the weeds alone. That is the heart of our Gospel lesson this morning. We need to remember the horrible things that have happened in our country when people felt they had the necessary wisdom and mandate to **weed out** the undesirable.

- Good Christians in Salem, Massachusetts executed a number of young women in an effort to rid the community of witches and those with the evil eye.
- People have been put to death, interred in camps, and had their property destroyed simply because their skin was a different color or their religious faith frightened those in the majority.
- Even today there are many who are eager to rid our nation of **illegal aliens and possible terrorists**. But how do we know if we have the right individuals?
- When Senator Barack Obama was asked to comment on the controversial cover of this week's **New Yorker** magazine, a picture that satirized the false notions about him and his wife, the Senator said simply that his greatest regret was that so many in this nation consider it a terrible thing to be called a Muslim.

I think there is great wisdom for us in the words .. ***leave the weeds alone.***

- Like Roy Almqvist and the butterfly bush, we cannot always make the correct decisions about issues and people. Some weeds make beautiful bouquets.
- What is more, the good and the bad are often intertwined in a complex manner. When Jesus was crucified the two thieves that hung with him initially appeared to be the same. But one was capable of change, even at the moment of death.
- God's love is great enough to tolerate a very mixed field of weeds and wheat. We must do the same. Our job is to live in this **mixed field** as agents of love and peace and reconciliation.

We must remember that the two things we are called to do in the world is to be **filled with joy** and **to love without qualification**. **Joy and love** are the clearest evidence that our faith is good and we are living in the hope of our baptism. **To judge others** has been particularly denied us. Jesus forbade it: ***Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.*** [Matthew 7:1]

So when all is said and done, **God will determine which of us is weed and which of us is wheat**. May it be our prayer that we all shall be gathered into God's barn and receive from his hand the blessing of eternal life. But for now, let us seek to be instruments of God's peace and love while we wait for the harvest. **Amen.**