

“Life in the Weeds”

But he said, “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matthew 13:29-30).

One of the occupational hazards of working with kids is that, for better or worse, you see them in all of their prepubescent glory. For the last 27 years, in one way or another, I have worked with middle school students, and for ten of those years Sonya also worked as a lunch lady in the ESM cafeteria. The result of this shared vocation is that we would often come home at night and shake our heads as we swapped stories about the foolishness we observed during the day. And one of the great blessings of being in the same church for 27 years, is the lesson that you can never judge a person by their eighth-grade year. We know this is true, because every year we see some of the same untamed hooligans of yesteryear who have since grown into wonderfully empathetic and civilized members of society (and some of you are here today).

Middle school ministry is an important reminder that when it comes to people, you always have to take the long view, and this is one of the most important lessons in today’s Gospel. In this reading from Matthew 13, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who sowed good seed in his field. Then, while he slept, an enemy came and sowed weeds in the field. When the weeds and the wheat began to grow together the servants came to the master and said, “Did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?” When the master replied that the weeds were the work of an enemy, the conscientious servants asked, “Then do you want us to go and gather the weeds?” And this is a completely logical question. Any reasonable gardener knows that you don’t allow weeds to grow in the garden. So, the question of the servants was the right question, and it was a good question, and it’s here that Jesus turns our assumptions upside down. You see, the farmer answers his servants in a way that makes no sense to us. He tells them to leave the weeds alone and not to worry but to simply let the weeds and the wheat grow together, trusting that they will be separated at the harvest.

The implications of the master’s instructions are astounding. This approach means that the weeds in the field will get the same loving care as the wheat! The same sunshine. The same fertilizer. The same water. It seems like a total waste of resources and not only that, but if there’s one thing a good farmer can’t stand it’s a messy field. Farmers like clean fields and pure harvests, and to have a field filled with nasty, gnarly weeds would be unthinkable...but not in this parable! At the master’s request, the wheat and the weeds grow together! And *this*, Jesus tells us, is what the “kingdom of heaven” is like (Matthew 13:24).

From the text, we don’t know how the crowd understood these confusing words, but as soon as Jesus and the disciples were away from the crowd, the disciples requested an explanation and, just as He had done earlier with the “Parable of the Sower,” Jesus interprets the meaning of this parable saying: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” and then in the harrowing words that conclude today’s reading Jesus boldly says to the disciples, “He who has ears, let him hear” (13:37-45).

As we process this explanation from Jesus there is a temptation to immediately begin wondering whether we are wheat or weeds. And this is a problem, because instead of turning to the clear promises of God that point us to the cross of Christ, and answer the question conclusively, we deal with the anxiety of this question by comparing ourselves to others and then identifying the people around us who in our estimation are clearly weeds. And the ugly truth is that we love to do this! We love to judge. We love to divide. We want to pull out the weeds and purify the field. But in doing this, we completely miss the point of the parable.

You see, if we believe the words of Jesus and take this story to be a parable about the kingdom of heaven, then by implication, it's also a parable about the Church...and its meaning for us is very important. You see, this story teaches us that "the sons of the kingdom" and "the sons of the evil one" will grow side by side – even in the Church – and at times we won't be able to tell the difference. And if we think being a Christian means that we should separate ourselves from the people *we* have judged to be sinners and to associate only with those who look good and do good and say good things, then we are setting *ourselves* up for judgment and we are missing the truth that God is creating life in the weeds.

Drawing on the language of today's text, St. Augustine once wrote, "They who today are weeds, tomorrow may be wheat." There's a beautiful truth in that statement, and today, we need to see that God does not give up on us, and the promises He makes in Baptism are real, and they are effective, and the second we seek to separate ourselves from "those sinners out there" rather than speaking the Word of Christ that promises to bring forth a good harvest, then we have become enemies of the kingdom. Martin Luther once wrote: "If we proceed to establish a congregation in which there is no sin, we will condemn weak Christians, and even the strong because they stumble at times, and must also exclude them from the church."

The core truth behind this parable about the kingdom of heaven is that God has planted us! And the field in which we are growing is a messy mix of saints and sinners who have nothing holding us together outside of the Risen Christ. And the truth of the Risen Christ is that He got into the weeds. He humbled himself and took on our flesh. He got into the weeds! And not only did He associate with sinners, but Paul goes so far as to tell us that, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (II Corinthians 5:21). The Son of God got into the weeds for us, and He died in the weeds for us, and He did all of this so that *we might be wheat!*

Because of this great Gospel truth, our job is not to judge. Instead, the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel and enlightened us with His gifts so that we can fully trust in the promises of God, no matter how messy the field gets. And in our times of frustration, we can remember the words of St. Peter which remind us that, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish" (II Peter 3:9).

What kind of crazy farmer would tolerate a field of weeds? It's a Farmer who loves to plant and grow and harvest His wheat. It is a gracious Farmer who knows that there is life in the weeds. So, you don't have to judge and you need not divide. Instead, you can grow where God has planted you, trusting that today and tomorrow, and in the weeks and months and years to come, the seed of God's Word will continue to do what God has promised, and that through your witness in the weeds, the Holy Spirit will continue to create life that will last forever. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today. Amen.

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