

Sermon, July 19, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends, talented musicians Jenny and Nathan Wilson from the Jenny Wilson Trio. They perform all over the region, but are based in Morgantown. Please check-out their Google site and Facebook page.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases are at an all-time high nationally, and many, if not most of our members are either in a high risk group, or spend time with friends and family members who are. We do not want to endanger any of them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission work and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we have reopened the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. At this point we are discussing Race and Racism in America, like the rest of the nation is or at least should be doing right now. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link to join. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office and we will put you in touch with someone who is smarter than I am about such things. Now today's Stupid Joke:

This was a big high school reunion year for me, but unfortunately the event has been canceled by the pandemic. So I have been trying to touch base with some of my classmates lately. I called an old friend yesterday and asked, "So, what's new in your life?"

And she said, “Well, after forty years my husband left me and ran off with my best friend.” I said, “Sorry to hear that. I thought I was your best friend.” And she said, “Not anymore.”

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Faithful God, most merciful judge, you care for your children with firmness and compassion. By your spirit, nurture us who live in your kingdom, that we may be rooted in the way of your Son, Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord. Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the forty-fourth chapter.

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

[Jesus] put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the

wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field?

Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Well it's still July, and in these parts that usually means baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and parables. And I'm glad that I stayed awake through most of last week's sermon, because now I know a few things about parables that I didn't before.

I mentioned last week that since so many of Jesus' parables were about farming and fishing, it's a safe bet that many of his listeners were farmers and fishermen. Folks who would certainly understand problems like certain weeds growing in a wheat crop much better than I do.

Like last week, the parable of the weeds in the wheat comes with its own explanation. And once again nearly all New Testament scholars agree that the explanation is probably the work of Matthew's author or a later editor and not Jesus.

Which makes sense, because I also learned last week that parables aren't puzzles or riddles. They are teaching tools. Their purpose is to clarify, not confuse. To provide answers, not raise questions. Jesus' immediate audience would by design have understood this parable, or it wasn't a very good parable. And I'm pretty sure this WAS and for that matter STILL IS a great parable--not only for Jesus' first listeners, but for Matthew's first readers, and also for us.

By the way, if you ascribe to the rapture theology inherent in modern Christian Fundamentalism, the Left Behind series of books and movies and today's Bible-thumping doomsday preachers you'd better hope that explanation didn't come from Jesus.

Because those folks have been saying for years that it's the GOOD people who will be snatched away from the earth before all the horrors of the end times. Yet according to OUR reading, those snatched away first are heading straight for the fire, while those left behind will shine in

the sun of the Kingdom. Of course rapture theology dates only as far back as the nineteenth century and most scholars say it is non-biblical. But that's a different sermon altogether, so let's get back to the weeds.

Because I do know SOMETHING about weeds. I am a homeowner with a big lawn, and I used to spend a lot of time gardening. The best gardening tip I ever learned was to plant lima beans in January. Why? So you'll never have to eat them.

When it comes to weeds, if you aren't sure whether an unknown plant is a valuable ornamental or just a weed, gently pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily or snaps off at the root and never grows back, then it was a valuable ornamental.

If you can't pull it out, or if it comes back even when you are positive you got rid of it, then it is a weed.

The best definition of weeds is probably, "any plant thriving exactly where you don't want it to." On a more positive note, author A.A. Milne, the creator of Winnie the Pooh, said that weeds are flowers too, once you get to know them. Cute.

When Jesus told the parable of the Weeds in the Wheat I bet his audience knew exactly what he was talking about. Because the word translated for us as "weeds" is actually *Zizania* in the original Greek. Older English versions of the Bible translated *Zizania* as "tares," but that is just wrong. Tares are common vetches. While not grown for human consumption, the vetch is often intentionally planted as green manure, meant to be plowed under as a natural fertilizer. Vetches are also sometimes grown as fodder for livestock.

Zizania is a different kettle of fish. Its Latin name is *lolium temulentum*, which literally means "drunken ryegrass." In English it is more politely called bearded darnel. Darnel has always been the bane of wheat farmers both in biblical times and still today.

It is a noxious weed whose seeds are toxic. If even a LITTLE darnel gets mixed in the wheat harvest, the bread made from it would likely make you sick. Larger amounts can cause hallucinations, blindness, and even death.

So, like the slaves in the parable, you might think the smart thing to do would be to go into the wheat field and aggressively tear out any plant that just MIGHT be bearded darnel. But in the parable, the householder said, “No, don’t do that.”

Why? Because the tricky thing about bearded darnel, as Jesus’ audience surely knew, is that for most of its life-cycle it is a weed that looks pretty much just like wheat. So not only would some of the wheat crop be removed in the process, likely much of the rest would be damaged or trampled underfoot. Tossing out the bad makes no sense at all, if it means disaster for the good.

The other reason why the servants were told not to try to pull the weeds was, it wasn’t their job. It’s up to the reapers who will come-in at harvest time when the mixed plants finally show their true colors. The reapers are much better qualified to sort them out.

And that’s the parable of the weeds in the wheat, plain and simple. Now all we have to do is figure out exactly what it means and what the heck that has to do with us.

My best guess is that once again, like last week, here in chapter thirteen Jesus was teaching the disciples something about the events that had just transpired back in chapter twelve, which we unfortunately skipped over. That’s where Jesus was criticized and rejected not just by religious leaders, but by many of his fellow Galileans back in his old stomping grounds. Jesus was shunned by some of his old neighbors and probably former friends, and even his own family.

In other words, these were folks who pretty much up until now looked and spoke and acted just like wheat, but turned out to be weeds. Surely the disciples were frustrated by the welcome they received there. What should they do about it? Apparently, nothing. Why stir-up trouble? God will sort things out in the end. It's not their job.

Sounds like good advice for Matthew's immediate audience too. They were part of a community of exiled Jews living far from home-- Scholars guess maybe up north in Antioch. That community had given the Jesus crowd mixed reviews at best. In fact Matthew hints that the Jewish Christians in the group had recently been tossed out of their own synagogues, their neighborhoods and some probably even out of their own homes based on religious differences. What were they to do about that? Apparently, nothing.

Humans being what they are, gut reactions often lead to overreactions, and the truly good folks would likely suffer even more in the process. This parable is another example of Matthew's recurrent theme of separation, be it weeds from wheat, good fish from bad fish, and sheep from goats. The point being that in the end it's God's job to do the separating, not ours.

In fact, Jesus warns throughout the Gospel of Matthew that's it's not our job to judge anyone anyway. Because once we start pointing fingers at folks with whom we might not get along, or who are different from us, it's our own community that suffers.

We would end up damaging the wheat at least as much as the weeds. That's why, especially in Matthew, Jesus teaches us not only to love our friends but also to try to love our enemies.

Turn the other cheek when necessary. Rather than retaliate or respond in kind, learn to just let things go. God is the one in charge of the departments of forgiveness and judgment. Because God alone knows how to temper divine wrath and judgment with divine love and mercy.

So I don't mean to dis' Matthew's explanation of the parable, which was certainly tailored to fit his own circumstance. But in today's world, I think this parable really isn't so much about devils and angels and enemies, gnashing teeth and fiery furnaces. It's more about having faith, not acting, reacting or especially overreacting rashly or judgmentally. It's all about being patient and trusting the master. Judgment of other people is God's job. Not ours.

And I'm certainly not the first person to interpret this Parable of the Weeds in the Wheat that way. In fact, the most common interpretation over the centuries is that this parable is all about tolerance. It answers questions like, "How are we, in our case the Straight White Anglo-Saxon Protestants of this world, supposed to deal with those who aren't like us?" Those who have different skin colors or accents; orientations, identities or lifestyles, or even those who have other religious beliefs.

A thousand years ago Bishop Wazo of Liege, a leader of the Gregorian Reforms, thought this parable was intended to teach the Church that it should always allow religious dissent to exist alongside orthodoxy. Judging others, especially on their belief systems is NOT our responsibility. The Lord will sort such things out if and when he sees fit.

Martin Luther agreed, cautioning that even when heretics ARE shunned or persecuted or killed by the Church for errant beliefs it deprives them of the ONE opportunity they might otherwise have had for salvation. Baptist theologian and founder of Rhode Island Roger Williams, himself a religious dissenter, wrote that governments should always tolerate the "weeds" of this world.

And the failure to do so inevitably damages the "wheat."

Besides, Milne just might be right, you know. Maybe some of what we see as weeds in our midst can indeed turn out to be flowers... once we just get to know them.

Amen.