

Pentecost 7 – Proper 11 – Year A – 2020

We are in the section of Matthew’s gospel that is full of parables – stories Jesus tells to teach a lesson, stories that generally draw on the lived experience of the people listening. In other words, it’s as if – if we have eyes to see and ears to hear – God speaks to us in our day to day life.

I spent a little time Friday morning in the Good News Garden with Sara and Laura. Sara was harvesting a bumper crop of basil, while Laura and I were doing some weeding and putting some chicken wire in place to protect a row of beans from critters. Weeding always fascinates me. There isn’t a great variety of weeds growing in our garden. You find the same three or four – over and over again! I recognize them, sometimes call them by the wrong names, and pull them out with varying success rates. Just like the weeds growing in my life.

Laura told me she had waited for some time to weed the slim row of carrots last week, *first* unable to tell what might be carrot from what was weed – *and then* because of a fear that if she pulled the weeds, she would end up pulling up the carrots as well.

And that is precisely what we have described in the parable we heard in today’s gospel – commonly referred to as the weeds among the wheat. In some translations, the weeds are called tares or bearded darnel. Bearded darnel is a species of ryegrass that is mildly toxic, and it so closely resembles wheat early on that it’s hard to tell the difference. At harvest time, though, the darnel heads of grain are smaller than the wheat, so they can be separated then. I also learned that near harvest time, the tares generally grow taller than the wheat – you can see them sticking out over the tops of the stalks of wheat.

Eventually, then, the weeds stick out. Eventually, you can tell the wheat from the tares by their fruits – by the grain itself. One of them is toxic, and the other makes bread for life.

There is an inherent tendency here to want to take the *explanation* of the parable that Matthew puts in the mouth of Jesus as a way of making a great distinction between the children of the kingdom of God and the children of the evil one. *We*, of course, are the children of the kingdom of God – and whomever we look upon as not fit to be in the same field with us are the weeds, children of the evil one. The end of this parsing of the parable is nearly like a fairy tale; *we* will shine like the sun in the kingdom of God, while all the evildoers will burn up in the furnace. *We* get a reward and *we* get to see our “enemies” get theirs, too!

But where is the challenge here? Where is the prodding, the question that jabs me just a little, to move me? Where is the bigger Truth that I am called to recognize?

There are two truths here, I think. One truth is this: What this parable – and Matthew’s explanation of it – show us *by our immediate reaction to it* – is how easily and comfortably we can see the world in dualistic terms. Black and white. Weed and wheat. Good and bad. Even Paul, in his letter to the Romans and elsewhere, is exceedingly fond of describing us as body and spirit, with the body being bad and the spirit being good. In some churches, that becomes a doctrine that separates life into the secular and the sacred, the worldly and the holy. That practice of separating things and people into two groups – us and them – too often moves us to focus, generally, on what *they* are doing to us, and how we can get *rid* of them. We don’t *want* weeds in our garden – and we are the ones deciding who is the weed. But we don’t always know which is the weed. Baby’s breath is cultivated and used in floral arrangements a great deal, but in California it’s considered a weed. I was ready to pull out the milkweed growing by the steps outside the front door at Emmaus until Ella stopped me, saying those plants were hosts to the monarch butterfly and should be left alone! Perhaps the first message is this: We need to be busy being wheat, or milkweed, or whatever we are – and trust that God will sort it all out in the end. It is *not for me* to be separating my world into “us and them,” “good and bad.” I will have enough to do to focus on being the good in the world, in body *and* in spirit.

The second, related truth I see embedded in this parable is the reality that we do live in a world full of wheat and weeds together. We rub shoulders with people with whom we disagree. But regardless of who I may think are weed or wheat, my roots are inexplicably tied up with yours. We are intermingled.

Episcopal priest Suzanne Guthrie, in her *Soulwork for Sundays* blog this week, led me to this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. King wrote:

“All I’m saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we’re caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.”ⁱ

“You can never be what *you* ought to be until *I* am what *I* ought to be.” We mourn the passing of great man this weekend. Representative John Lewis was often called “the Conscience of the Congress.” When I thought about his life, it came to me that there were many folks who saw him as a weed to be eradicated, no doubt. But if he and others had not walked – or attempted to walk – across the Edmund Pettus bridge on March 7, 1965, and if someone had not filmed the events of that Bloody Sunday so all the world could see it, the Civil Rights Act might never have been signed. For many, Lewis was a troublemaker, as many have labeled the non-violent protestors of our *own* day. And although Lewis was told by his parents *not* to get in the way, not to get in trouble, Lewis had this to say in an interview for the *Atlantic* in 2018, “In 1955, at 15 years old, I heard of Dr. King, and I heard of Rosa Parks. They inspired me to get in trouble.” They inspired him, he said, “to find a way to *get* in the way, to get in trouble... good trouble, necessary trouble.”ⁱⁱ “Good trouble.”

John Lewis was a man of faith who strove to be what he ought to be, so that others could be what *they* ought to be. And sometimes, perhaps, we are called to be what some would call weeds... to take on the task, as Lewis said, “to redeem the soul of America” and to build the beloved community.

Let us go be milkweed for the monarch butterflies, or baby’s breath to beautify a bouquet, or wheat to be made into bread. Let us be what we ought to be, so that others may simply be. And let us trust God to do the sorting at the end.

There is a quote from 19th century English poet Dinah Craik that speaks this for me... “Oh, the comfort — the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person — having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Amen.

[Isaiah 44:6-8](#) [Psalm 86:11-17](#) [Romans 8:12-25](#) [Matthew 13:24-30,36-43](#)

ⁱ King Jr., Martin Luther. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” April 16, 1963.

https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

ⁱⁱ Newkirk II, John R. “How Martin Luther King Recruited John Lewis,” *The Atlantic*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/john-lewis-martin-luther-king-jr/552581/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Craik, Dinah. *A Life for a Life*. 1859.

https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dinah_Craik#:~:text=Oh%2C%20the%20comfort%20%E2%80%94%20the%20inexpressible,then%20with%20the%20breath%20of