

## THE WEEDS OF THE FIELD



Matthew 13.27 "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? . . . do you want us to go and gather them?' But (the Master) replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both (the wheat and the weeds) grow together until harvest. . .'"

Okay, I know that I have been preaching most weeks this summer on the Old Testament story, but today's Gospel reading is my second favorite of Jesus' many parables. So as far as the Old Testament reading today, let me just note that though everyone seems to remember this story from Sunday School, but we remember the wrong part of the story. What everyone remembers is Jacob's ladder, that stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending upon it. Remember that last week, the Patriarch Jacob was fleeing for his very life from his elder brother Esau, from whom he had taken both his paternal blessing and birthright. The

really important part of the story, for Jacob at least, was that having stolen his elder brother's birthright and blessing, would Jacob really receive God's blessing in the end? Would Jacob really be the inheritor of God's promise to the Patriarch Abraham, to receive the Promised Land and to be the father of a great nation, and THAT is what God promises today in Jacob's dream, and that is what is important for this story, for now. In time, Jacob will still have to face the wrath of his brother Esau when he returns, and next week he needs to find a wife in order to continue the Abrahamic lineage. And Jacob's getting a wife is itself, a most interesting story for next Sunday!

Meanwhile, back to the Parable of the Weeds in the Field. Like last week's well-known Parable of the Sower, today's Gospel reading is just another marvelous illustration of Jesus' ability to teach great truths without elaborate explanation or complex illustrations. Today's gospel is just a simple story about a farmer who though he had sown good seed discovered later that he also had weeds in his field. I have the exact same problem in my garden. You do too, I am sure. This is something with which we can all easily identify.

The farmer's servants, however, are certain that an enemy has done this, and they are anxious to go out quickly and pull the weeds. But the farmer is remarkably less hasty. No, he says, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the good seed along with

them. No, he says; let them both grow together until the harvest. And this, says Jesus, is the way our heavenly Father deals with us. God is full of great patience and gentleness with us.

Behold the awful weeds of the field,  
they neither spin nor toil,  
Yet I tell God in all His Glory,  
allows them to remain there amidst his finest wheat.

God is more interested in supporting and strengthening and protecting the good in us, than in violently eradicating the evil. He lets both grow together within us, trusting that by harvest; we'll have matured and become stronger. God, says Jesus, builds a person up by gentle encouragement; he doesn't tear them down to get at their vices, as we so often do. In the words from the Wisdom of Solomon: "Although you are sovereign in strength, (O Lord), you judge with mildness, and with great forbearance you govern us . . . (and) through such works you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind."

The implication for us here is as obvious as it is difficult for us to follow: if this is how we are treated by God, then in the same way this is how we ought to treat one another. The righteous must be kind. We are not to be the sort

of people who are constantly examining and recording the mistakes of others. We are to keep no inventory of the faults of our neighbors and friends and family members. We are not to be quick to notice the weeds, the defects, the shortcomings of others. Yet, we are indeed so often so quick to criticize, to complain, to become intolerant, to become self-righteous even. Our job is instead to support and encourage the growth of the wheat, of the good in one another, to respect the dignity of every human being. And yet, so often the Church as an institution has been viewed by the world as having an attitude of incessant scolding. The Christian Church, it seems, is constantly deploring this or denouncing that evil in our society or in ourselves, endless self-righteous campaigns against others. We are often so much more like the servants in today's story than like the farmer. Too often we pay more attention to the weeds than to the wheat.

And it just doesn't work. For Jesus' teaching is as practical as it is filled with common sense. For we know that you don't make people better by constantly hectoring and criticizing them. That only embitters them and makes people defensive. Our role as Christians is to affirm and encourage the good in one another, and to leave it to the God of the Harvest to take care of the evil in God's own way and in God's own time. We don't necessarily have to "do something" about that! If only

we could learn this gentle yet profound lesson, it would transform all of our relationships, and it would also make us much more peaceful and contented in ourselves, and it would change the world. For the critical person, for the one always alert to the weaknesses and faults of others, is so rarely at rest or at peace within themselves, such a person can never leave well enough alone, and is constantly boiling inside, like those anxious slaves in today's reading. The cost of such vigilance is high. And the absence of weeds, in the end, does not guarantee a good harvest. We need to learn to trust in the God of the Harvest, to 'let it be' as the Beatles sang, to let both the good and evil grow together, and to nurture all the good we see in one another.

Finally, we need to be sure to apply this lesson to ourselves as well. We have to be as gentle with ourselves as God is with us and as we ought to be with one another. We have to learn to accept ourselves just as we are, with all our weaknesses and faults and imperfections, with all the weeds that sometimes choke the good seed in us. There is no point in constantly focusing upon our faults, as sadly we so often do. There is no point in forever picking on ourselves; we'll only end up pulling out the good seed along with the weeds. Any good confessor knows that the only effective way of tackling sin is by cultivating virtue, with gentleness and without strain. We

shouldn't pull at the weeds; we should water the wheat. We shouldn't draw attention to the evil we do; we should encourage and strengthen the good within us.

So then, if you have a particular weakness or fault or sin that sometimes gnaws at you or depresses you, then acknowledge its existence without paying much attention to it, or being too anxious about it, and without being surprised that weeds have grown up where you thought only good seed was planted. Leave it alone. Leave it to God and the harvest. Be gentle with yourself. Don't even ask God to remove your faults or weaknesses, or even to ignore them. Instead ask God to strengthen the growth of good within you, and then leave yourself to God's patience and loving kindness, just as the farmer leaves his field with its weeds and wheat to the gentle power of the sun, knowing that it rains on the just and unjust alike.

This parable is an obvious and commonplace lesson for all of us. Think of the transforming power of this quiet wisdom that lets both the good and evil grow together until the harvest. It is exactly the kind of wisdom that can transform the ordinary in our lives to reveal the extraordinary grace of God, and change the way we treat one another, transforming us, and the world around us. AMEN.