

Weeds and wheat—we are both

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, July 17, 2011, The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.*

There is a big problem (in fact there are probably several big problems) with understanding life in terms of wheat and weeds. The biggest one is that whoever is hearing the parable always concludes that he or she is the wheat and that all others are the weeds. And in that second—indeed in the blink of an eye—the strife born in all religion rears its ugly and violent head: the believer and the infidel, the saved and the unsaved, the orthodox and the unorthodox, the progressive and the fundamentalist. And we are off.

Maybe this will help; maybe it won't. The Jesus Seminar scholars tell us there is little evidence that Jesus really told this parable, their first hint being his use of allegory as a genre of story telling. Jesus, they claim, rarely spoke like that. An allegory rests upon the assumption that to understand requires special knowledge, a special knowing as it were, available to one group but not to another. That kind of Gnostic thinking was certainly present in the mix of conversation at the time of Jesus, but the scholars believe that most of what we know about him indicates that he chose not to use that kind of insider language. Who can say? I do value the work of the Seminar greatly and find it critically helpful in teaching and preaching as well as informing my own efforts to live as one who wants to be a Christian.

But here is the interesting thing to me: In some ways it doesn't matter whether or not Jesus literally told this story because in the consciousness, certainly the religious consciousness, and I would argue the broader cultural consciousness as well, in every way that matters this story and its premise exist in us. By the time Matthew's narrative was composed and undoubtedly by the time it existed in its current form, which is to say very early in the Christian movement, the belief that there would be those who got it, the wheat, and those who did not, the weeds, was entrenched in the Christian story. I believe it shapes us to this day.

Sadly it seems that in most categories we understand ourselves best when we understand ourselves over and against another. Oddly, or perhaps not, the worse the other becomes, the more deeply we feel unity among ourselves, with those like us. For the community of new Christians in the time that all the gospel narratives were written (and particularly the later ones like Matthew, Luke, and John), the tension between Jews who followed Jesus and those who did not—a tension made even worse by the growing strife between Jews and Romans—was palpable in the life of this movement. For us to read these passages without fully acknowledging that dynamic is to miss the context and is quite frankly dangerous. It would be as incomplete as reading a history of our current experience with no mention of the economic crisis.

The unfortunate legacy to us as inheritors of this tradition is that in the process of canonization and other examples of drawing lines in the sand, our notion of what makes sacred literature sacred became hard and fast. Rather than struggling with the hard questions of context, we simply absorbed these notions of the way of the world uncritically. As a result, this idea of wheat and weeds being separated in some final accounting with great and good outcome for the wheat and really bad outcome for the weeds, as in gnashing of teeth in heat worse than ours, lives in our souls. Somehow with very little thought, this "we-versus-they" mentality came to dominate our theology and our policies. Beyond a doubt the most unified time—was it days, weeks, or months—I ever can recall in this country occurred shortly after 9/11. Certainly not during Vietnam, not in the Gulf War in the early 90's, but immediately after we had experienced as a real and present threat an enemy on our homeland did we fully experience unity as a nation—a fully understandable and in my lifetime one-off phenomenon. Some of us, who in retrospect view our fervor and flag-waving

during those days as being as close as we have ever come to jingoism, admit a bit of embarrassment, but we also know that we will never forget the primal fear we felt. That shocking event stirred deep feelings in us for good and ill; to deny that truth leaves it unevaluated.

Here is the rub for those of us who would follow Jesus: We are called to a different and deeper kind of allegiance. Yes, we can be patriotic, but as I understand the gospel, we are followers of Jesus first and Americans or Canadians or British only second. The narrative at the core of our lives is the story of Jesus, the story of a man who put forth no creed but whose life calls us to live globally first and nationally second, to live as those who love God first and understand themselves as Christians second. I don't know how to do that, just that we are called to do so. That is probably somewhat disingenuous: I do know some things to do—to attempt as Paul said to “put on the mind of Christ,” to live a life one day at a time, consciously and earnestly attempting to live with honesty, integrity and compassion.

My thesis is that these stories of wheat and weeds, and others like them, e.g., the happy little story of sheep and goats, must be understood for what they are lest they continue to engender within us hardness that I believe saddens the heart of God. Our context is different from these early Christians in more than the obvious ways. We do not believe that the end is near. Our job is to grow in the faith with a view to the whole arc of creation, a view which is wider and more merciful than it is tight and harsh. We are not there yet. For example, and I know I am now approaching dangerous ground, as in the preacher who has stopped “preachin’ and gone to meddlin’,” seventy percent of Americans support the death penalty, this according to the most recent Gallup poll. You can't separate wheat from weeds any more permanently than that. That statistic means that probably many of you support it. Beyond thinking that you are dead wrong, and I do, I promise not to go on and on about it. The only time of which I am aware that someone actually got stirred up enough by one of my sermons that he walked out, stormed out actually, was an occasion when I got on a really high horse about capital punishment. Upon reflection, I am somewhat ashamed that in twenty years of preaching only one person has had such a reaction. The really sad thing was that this man had just given the church a fabulous concert grand, and he took it back—not with him as he stormed out, but shortly thereafter. Imagine how pleased the Director of Music was with me.

Among developed nations, we Americans seem to have a particular penchant for capital punishment. In my heart of hearts, I believe that deeply-held position is a deep canker in our national soul and that it wounds us again and again; and with even more sadness I fear that some justification for it comes from hardness caused by an uninformed reading of our beloved scripture, including the misreading of passages like this one.

Like most of life, Christianity gets harder, not easier. The precious children we baptized at the nine o'clock service are not being initiated into a life of perfection, to a life without weeds. Nor are they being smugly admitted to a society that claims that we are thoroughly right and that all others are thoroughly wrong. They are entering a tradition which at its best slowly but surely transforms those who would engage it into a particular way of being, of living, of loving. They will be weedy at times and abundantly “wheaty” at others; and when they are lost and when they are found, when they are devout and when they are disbelieving, they like all of us will never—not for one moment—reside beyond the providence and love of God.

Weeds and wheat—we are both, and by the grace of God, our journeys through searing losses and glorious triumphs will take us where we need to go.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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