

Living Amid the Weeds

This week's Gospel picks up where we left off last week. Jesus is using parables to teach the crowd about the Kingdom of Heaven. Having told the Parable of the Sower who scatters seed in all sorts of places, Jesus moves into the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. He describes a farmer who sows good wheat in his field. By dark of night, an enemy sows weeds among the wheat and sneaks away. The wheat and weeds both come up, so thoroughly entangled that the weeds can't be pulled without uprooting the wheat. So, the farmer tells his servants to let the two grow together until the harvest, when the weeds can be collected, bundled, and burned, leaving the wheat pristine and ready to be gathered in.

Last Sunday, we speculated that the seed represented Jesus's followers. This morning, Jesus confirms that we were right. The disciples come to Jesus, just as they did last week, asking him to explain this parable. Jesus answers that he is the farmer. The field represents the world, the wheat seed represents the children of the Kingdom, the bad seed sown among them represents "children of the evil one," the enemy is the Adversary, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Aren't you glad we got that all straightened out?

This parable and the Parable of the Sower appear to be a complementary set. Both parables are in the lectionary, important enough to get a whole Sunday to themselves. They're both agricultural stories filled with farming references that Jesus's audience would easily understand. They both say something important about the Kingdom of Heaven and God, and Jesus explains both parables to the disciples, something he doesn't always do. One might expect the two parables to get equal treatment from Bible scholars. When researching this sermon, however, I was surprised that modern commentators seem to have less to say about this parable than they do about the Parable of the Sower. Perhaps that's because this parable is simpler than

the other, and its message seems clear. Perhaps this parable so obviously springs from the other that all the interesting comments have already been made. But I suspect that the difference may be due in part to the larger role played by the Adversary in this one. The Adversary only had a bit part last week, represented by birds that snatched up the seeds that had been sown on an open path. The focus of that story shifted pretty quickly to the other venues, especially to the good soil that produced a hundredfold yield. This week, however, the Adversary is the villain of the piece, actively sowing evil among the children of the Kingdom. Plus, there's all that stuff about bundling up and burning the weeds at harvest time, an uncomfortable reference to the final judgment at the end of the world. Who wants to think about that?

Like it or not, I don't think we have much choice. This parable appears only in the Gospel of Matthew, so we could play scholarly games around whether Jesus himself really told this story or the author of this gospel wrote it to make a point to his particular audience. We could, but I won't, because when you start cherry-picking the Gospels, you stop asking who Jesus was and what he wanted to teach us and start trying to turn him into the god you want him to be. It's tempting, but it's also prideful and idolatrous, and it deprives us of the chance to do the hard, honest work of learning from his teachings. So, let's dig in.

Our version of this parable talks about "weeds," but older translations identify them as "tares," or *zizania* (ζιζάνια) in Biblical Greek. Modern biologists think tares were darnel weed, a kind of ryegrass that grows in the Middle East. Darnel weed is intoxicating, so early cultures sometimes used it to give bread and beer an extra kick. It's also poisonous in large doses, and when it shows up in literature – Shakespear's *King Lear*, for example – it stands for treachery and toxicity. And it thrives best when it's interplanted with domesticated grain like wheat.

Jesus's listeners would have known all about darnel and its potentially lethal properties. They would also have known that darnel weed is almost indistinguishable from wheat until it matures. Jesus can tell the difference between wheat and darnel, but we can't, which is why the farmer told his servants not to root out the weeds until they were fully grown. They would have ripped up a whole lot of perfectly good wheat if they had started too soon. Jesus was reminding them – and us – that patience is prized in the Kingdom of Heaven, along with forbearance. We aren't to worry about which of us are wheat and which are weeds. That's God's call, not ours.

Ironically, many 19th and 20th century commentators used this parable to justify condemning people whom they decided were “children of the evil one” and kicking them out of church. They don't seem to have recognized that punishing people and driving them away is like ripping up wheat along with weeds. It hurts everyone in the congregation, not just the so-called sinners. Nor did they get Jesus's point that the reapers in this parable represent angels, not us. As Abraham's grandson Jacob saw, the angels travel constantly between Heaven and Earth doing God's work in the world. It's not our place to take over their responsibilities, especially when we might be tearing things up that God wants to keep in place.

Speaking of angels, let's spend just a moment on the one who fell the farthest. I don't think we can claim to be Christian and still pretend that Jesus was just spouting metaphors when he talked about the evil one. We can't worship our Lord as the embodied Word of God one minute and dismiss him as a superstitious peasant the next. Jesus didn't often talk about the Adversary, but he mentioned him more than once and even told his disciples about a brief conversation that the two of them had shortly after his baptism. Jesus says there's a malevolent being in the world that envies and despises humanity, and we're wise to take his word for it. But I wonder whether the “children of the evil one” that Jesus refers to in this parable are human at

all. The Adversary is not the Creator. No matter how devious and determined he is, I don't believe he can make human children. We belong to God, even when the Adversary tricks us into doing things that make Jesus weep. So, when Jesus says that the angels will collect and burn all causes of sin and evildoers, maybe he isn't threatening us with eternal hellfire so much as he's promising that all the lies and temptations that lead us away from God will go up in flames. It is, I'll admit, a minority view. We'll have to wait until the end of the age to find out.

Jesus spoke often enough about the reckoning that will come at the end of days that we can't honestly ignore what's coming. But perhaps that reckoning will be less terrifying than the fire and brimstone types have led us to believe. Sooner or later, I know that I will come face to face with my Redeemer, who will be fully aware of every petty, prideful, selfish, and dishonest thing I've ever done, along all the good and gracious things I've left undone. The list of my shortcomings will undoubtedly be long. But Jesus's profound love for all of us gives me hope that his grace will prevail, and the lists of humanity's flaws and foibles will become fuel for the divine fire that will make this world, and us, worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Pope Francis sees this parable as a reminder that even those of us who seem the most corrupted can be saved by repentance and divine grace right up to our final breath. That means we need to be patient and pray for one another, never giving up hope that the better angels of everyone's nature will prevail in the end. In the meanwhile, we live among the weeds, doing our best to grow into the people God wants us to be despite the fears and temptations that surround us. We freely offer our hearts to God and ask his angels to bring us whatever we need to grow into as much faith and goodness as we can. And we ask God to burn away our shame and sorrow so that, when the time is right, we can be gathered like good grain into the many heavenly mansions that were always intended to be our eternal home. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.