

Sermon: Proper 11a
July 17, 2011
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Today's gospel reading is the 2nd in a trilogy of parables related to sowing seeds – last week it was amazing harvest yield we realize when we tend our fields in keeping with God's desires.

Next week it is the mustard seed; the gift of the smallest of seeds and the extraordinary power it contains.

I love how Jesus starts his stories – none of the vulgarities of our modern cinema with violence and blood letting; none of the darkness of film noire or the quirkiness of an indie film.

No, not Jesus.

His set up goes right to the heart of the matter in a direct way: “The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to....” And we – and all who were present at the 1st telling and all who have heard this story in the thousands of years since- are off on an adventure as full of twists and turns as our favorite mystery novel.

Today, Jesus tells us, the Kingdom of heaven may be compared to the dilemma of seeds versus weeds in this parable about sowing in a field.

I grew up in a small farming community just east of Niagara Falls, NY. My father's father, his 5 brothers and their father were farmers; some raised dairy cows and sold milk and cheese; others were fruit farmers; others sowed seeds, raising vegetables and grain for human and animal consumption.

For the 1st 9 years of my life we - my parents and three siblings – lived on a working farm. In the years since when I have had sufficient, sunlit acreage, I've maintained a small vegetable garden.

In the years where all I've had is a sunlit patio, I manage a couple of potted tomato and pepper plants, counting on the vegetable market for other fresh in-season essentials.

All of this by way of qualification, I guess; justifying my insight into today's lesson through my 21st century eyes, adjusting my vision and tuning my ears to see and hear what Jesus' audience saw and heard in this tale.

If we read too quickly, with too little understanding, we walk away with a feeling that this text is pretty basic and simple: there are good people in the world, represented by the good seed.

And then there are the not-so-good – bad – people in the world who are represented by the weeds. We are instructed not to put them in their places ourselves, but to wait for

the harvest, for the Day of Judgment when all will be cared for and we, the wheat, will be taken to heaven, and they, the weeds, will be thrown into the fire.

But let's look a little bit more carefully and unpack a few of the questions the text suggests.

First, we hear that the owner has sown the wheat and the 'enemy' has sown the weeds. So, why didn't the owner have the servants sow the seed, normally a duty they would perform?

And why does an enemy need to plant weeds? Anyone with a yard, much less a garden, knows that weeds grow quite nicely without being intentionally introduced.

But this is just the beginning of the peculiarities.

The seed sown by the owner is always referred to as 'good' seed. Would a gardener sow any other kind of seed but a good seed?

And the command by the owner not to tear up the weeds because they will be dealt with at the harvest. This is perhaps the strangest aspect of all; gardens are weeded not just once, but several times during a season. A few good plants might be pulled up accidentally, but in the end the seeds produce stronger and healthier plants after a good weeding.

Not only that, but Jesus' Jewish audience would know that a field with two kinds of plants in it, including a combination of wheat and weeds, would make the field ritually unclean. Levitical law says that it is actually unlawful to have a field with two kinds of seed in it – a field with wheat and weeds together was ritually unclean.

So, the slaves in the story not only want to remedy this cleanliness problem as soon as possible by pulling up the weeds, they feel compelled to do so, leaving the wheat as the sole, pure seed in the field.

But the sower won't permit this, reasoning that the process of weeding would result in destroying some of the wheat by mistake and sacrificing a healthy plant or two.

Yes, this parable's message is clear: God tell us not to weed the field because the wheat is too precious to take the risk of destroying even a single grain.

From a gardener's perspective, that's frustrating news! God doesn't want us to do any weeding until harvest time, when God will do the separating of wheat and weeds for us. And God knows, just as a gardener does, that some weeds actually help keep the wheat healthy as it grows.

And...if we, you and I consider our lives as fields of wheat and weeds – where sometimes we are the beneficial wheat and other times we are more on the weedy end

of things – and yes, we ALL have weedy fields - we just might be thankful that God isn't weeding us out quite yet.

Thank God weeding isn't going on in that field, my field, today because there are some days when I feel more like the weeds than the wheat.

Thank God I don't have to show God my fruit today, because there are some days when I don't feel like I'd have so much to show.

Thank God we aren't in charge of weeding in one another's gardens, as tempting as that may be, because there are some people I know who would love to weed me of everything that irritates them.

Thanks God I'm not in charge of weeding, because some days I'm tempted to treat as weeds those who I love and cherish.

Thank God that God sets out our tasks for us: to bear fruit, to grow strong, to resist being choked down by weeds around us; to not uproot that which grows near us, to not inspect our neighbor's fruit, even when it smells rotten to us.

It is so human to want immediate and visible signs that assure us we are on the right side and, more importantly, that God is on that side with us. But Someone else, that is, God, is giving orders and is in charge of the field, the planting, the growing and the harvesting; and it seems that sorting, weeding, rewarding and punishing are not our concern.

Are not our concern.

This parable is in fact one of mercy for us: hope remains – it's not set in stone how things will turn out. There's still time for us to change if we feel we are too much like the weeds, not much like the wheat.

And Jesus takes us even deeper. A farmer will tell you that there is something about wheat and weeds that makes them hard to separate; they become so intertwined, grow so closely together, it is difficult to tear them apart without damaging both – until they are fully grown, ready for harvest.

If the wheat represents the children of God, and the weed represents all causes of evil and evildoers and they are intertwined, what does it mean if we all mix in together until we are fully grown?

What does it mean if we cannot tell the good from the bad? If we, the servants of God, set out now to tear up the weeds in our garden, who, what would we tear out?

Well, we would tear ourselves out.

We cause evil, because we are imperfect, because we are human, because we make mistakes, because we are ignorant, because we are hard hearted - we have many reasons, but it does not change the fact that we create and are the weeds in the garden.

We ignore God, we take our blessings for granted, we do not follow God's will. If this seems hopeless we need to remember that God protects us, just as he protected Jacob.

God says wait, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat.

God says wait - my garden is not yet full grown, not yet developed, not yet ready. And we are thankful for God's good grace and care.

And God saying wait is a powerful message of how God feels about us – imagine that you are the wheat – what if your field was weeded, and you were uprooted, along with the weeds, and destroyed, even though you are a healthy plant.

What if you were overlooked by God, deemed unimportant when compared with the prospect of ridding the world of evil?

What if individual humans, just one person in a world full of people, wasn't counted as having worth?

What if God didn't see us as something worth saving?

But thanks be to God – we learn over and over again that indeed we, as God's children, are worth counting – we are worth saving, we are worth hearing, we are worth seeing - even if it means letting the unclean weeds grow around us, God will not overlook us.

God knows us inside and out and is still with us, always and everywhere.

No wonder God is not willing to risk our destruction just to get rid of some weeds.

We are too precious;

we are too beloved.

Thank God. Amen