

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Letting the Wheat and Weeds Grow Together

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Jesus put before the crowd another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 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?’ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

We take the bible so seriously that we frequently miss the humor. Perhaps Matthew intended to present a ridiculous situation to charm us with humor. He writes that some assiduous enemy of the farmer has saved up weed seed and gone and sown it in the field to sabotage the farmer. This is of course absurd. Weeds grow naturally and the weed referred to here is one that mimics wheat and is common in wheat fields. But Matthew has to say this because of the point he is trying to make. He believes that a force has been active within the church corrupting some of its members.

We frequently see in parables, as we have them, that the evangelists have no understanding of Palestinian agricultural practices. This doesn't make the parable less useful and it doesn't make it less authoritative but it does provide us an opening to ask of it: why does Matthew take this story and use it?

By the time of Matthew, late 1st Century C.E.¹, the church was experiencing a problem. Some in its midst were leading good Christian lives and others in the congregation, while still worshiping, were obviously sabotaging the Gospel message. Matthew assumes that the Devil has come into the church and converted some of its

¹ I prefer C.E., Common Era over A.D. for there is no visible proof that we are living in the Year of our Lord.

members, or perhaps that the Evil One has placed evil members in the midst of the true members, and it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other.

The question is, should we expel, root out, or get rid of the evil members now or should we wait? Matthew's answer is that we should wait. We are not perceptive enough to know who can be redeemed, who is hopelessly in the Devil's clutches and who is obviously saved. All will be made clear at the harvest, in our case the Day of Judgment. Those of us who are faithful are called simply to remain faithful until that day and to let God make the decisions.

The Old Testament has a very different understanding of salvation from that of the New Testament. In the OT there is no everlasting life, no beatific vision, no heaven for the faithful believer, and no hell for the damned. Everyone, except Enoch, Moses and Elijah is in Sheol. Only those alive at the last day will live forever. All others, you and me, regardless of the faithfulness of our lives, go to Sheol. Sheol is not hell. It is the only place God is not. This is true for the entirety of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Old Testament we accept as the larger part of our bible.

This caused Israel theological grief. Since the Day of the Lord kept not happening there appeared to be no hope for the faithful. In the exile, in the 6th Century, in Babylon, modern day Iraq, they encountered Zoroastrianism. This Persian (modern Iran) faith which is still practiced by a tiny persecuted group of believers, is dualistic. It gave the Jews the idea of salvation of individuals and the Persian loan word, diabolos or devil. This introduced the helpful insight that evil exists in active opposition to the good. Without this insight God is responsible for all that happens, good and bad. We sometimes reflect this faith when we believe that God gives people cancer, or death. God does not. God does not test us. Now I would exceed your patience if I pursued this point further in this sermon and I would lose the point of the sermon. So we can talk about it after Mass if you wish. The theology of the New Testament is radically dependent upon this gift from the Zoroastrians. I frequently point out that the New Testament is much more judgmental than the Old Testament and this is in large part because the NT judges individuals and our eternal salvation. The OT condemns many actions but it has no concept of eternal salvation. Let me hasten to add, I am a student primarily of the OT and I value it greatly because of the insights it gives me on how God works in the world. Nevertheless we ought not to read into the OT what isn't there.

This is a long way back to the parable and necessary, at least in my mind, because I know that I am treading on thin ice when I assert that I find the concept of Devil, who in the NT is synonymous with Satan², important. If Devil/Satan language makes you uncomfortable then perhaps simply accepting that in the NT Evil does not spring from God, will provide a bridge. Evil exists somewhere out there and our lives are a constant struggle between good and evil. Today's Gospel speaks alternatively of the Devil and the Evil One. They are the same figure.

Do we have the issue Matthew depicts in this parable? Some might say that the problem of the Episcopal Church is that we have no standards. We'll accept almost anything without complaint. Those who broke away from us, whether because of the ordination of women, the revision of the Prayer Book in 1979, the consecration of Gene Robinson or the authorization of clergy to officiate at same-sex weddings, are clear that

² Satan in Job is not the same as the Devil. In Job Satan is a member of God's Court whose role is to test the faithfulness of believers. Satan can be translated, in Job, as Prosecuting Attorney.

you and I by our continuing worship in the Episcopal Church are the bad seed. Indeed on Thursday I read a press release that the Church of England was beyond saving and therefore an alternative Anglican Church is beginning in England to adhere strictly to what Jesus cared about. Amazingly, it seems that Jesus was obsessed with homosexuality, abortion and what bathroom we used. Of course the NT is entirely silent on these issues but those beginning a new Anglican Mission to England this week are clear that the heart of the Gospel is not how we treat the poor but how we conduct our lives as moral, continent, heterosexual, monogamous beings. They say and believe that my morality on sexual issues trumps my commitment to ending poverty! Not as I read the bible but then I've never been accused of sympathy with those possessed of great clarity on personal moral issues. When I read the bible it is entirely about how we live in community and care for the weak and vulnerable among us.

How do we respond to those breaking away from the Episcopal Church? To date we've largely responded with lawsuits. I've followed many of them very closely and they all pain me. The Episcopal Church has won most of them with notable exceptions in Texas and we have thereby regained the use of very large church complexes with too few continuing Episcopalians to support the physical plant. Fortunately, again with the exception notably of the Diocese of Fort Worth in Texas, these suits are winding down.

Do we, again, have a problem? I ran across a website that tells us what churches must do if they want to grow. I am as fascinated by these lists as I am by the lawsuits, and probably find them as troubling as I do the lawsuits. This list is from a Southern Baptist, Thom Rainer³ and gives 5 ways to increase membership. If you've ever attended a course on how to use volunteers effectively these 5 reasons will be familiar.

1. Raise the expectations of membership.
2. Require an entry class for membership.
3. Encourage ministry involvement.
4. Offer more options for worship times.
5. Monitor the attendance of each member.

I have no doubt that a church that employs these 5 reasons will show some growth although most will object to monitoring attendance.

It seems to me, and this is a leap, that these five points on what I can do to increase church membership miss the entire point of being a church. We are not simply a volunteer organization although we have volunteers. We are not simply a fellowship organization although community is crucial to us. We are not simply a service organization although service is at the heart of who we are. We are not an intellectual organization and while intellectual challenges and rigorous scholarship are important they are secondary to who we are. These wonderful marks of a successful nonprofit are all temptations of the Evil One. It is a weed growing in the wheat. The only thing that is important for us to do is to proclaim the Gospel with effectiveness so that people are converted to a faithful life which will give them meaning.

This section of Matthew, and this is our 3rd week in it, is all about being the church. As Richard Rohr writes helpfully this week faith means that we seek understanding and not certainty. The church thrives when it welcomes doubt and is unafraid of questions. It dies when it is defensive and clear about who is in and who is out. Does thriving mean we have a balanced budget? Frequently but not always. Does

³ <http://www.churchcentral.com/blogs/the-1-reason-for-decline-in-church-attendance/>

thriving mean we attract new members? Frequently but not always. It does mean that those of us who do attend understand who and whose we are more clearly than we would were we not here and hearing the gospel.

The parable this morning, if I haven't lost all hope of your recalling it, is clear that our purpose is to be faithful and to those of us who are in church leadership especially to be faithful. Everything else is superfluous to what it means to be Christian.

Rather than abide by the 5 suggestions for church growth I believe that we are to model a radically open and forgiving model of what it means to follow Christ. My entire purpose in ministry is summed up by serving Christ as best I can and not worrying about your salvation. The Evil One thrives when we begin deciding who a good or faithful Christian is. Our faith survives when we realize that that decision is God's alone and God has never asked us for our advice in deciding the salvation of anyone. So enjoy your Christianity. If you enjoy it others will be attracted to it and our pews may fill. Regardless enjoy your Christianity.