

Wheat & Weeds

The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer, who sowed good seed in a field.

Those of us who garden know something of the joy of planting and harvesting – it adds a certain rootedness to our living. Sitting near my roses and glads that are blooming, or picking the beans and dill for supper meals makes the early spring work of tilling and planting and weeding all worthwhile. We assume most of the seeds will come up, and patiently and persistently dig out the weeds that seem to cut off the growth of the good plants. Nobody likes bindweed taking over!

Jesus told parables/wisdom stories often related to nature, everyday living. He said that nature, what he say around him was like...well, the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Imagine Jesus, wandering the hillsides and as he is walking, he takes time to reflect on the common agricultural practice he sees around him: how some seeds fall on rocky ground, but can't root, some seeds fall on thorns but are easily distracted by survival. Some seeds seem to flourish, with abundant yields.

Matthew more than any of the other gospel writers, includes many of Jesus' stories that deal with practical, human problems, the kinds of problems confronted every day by individuals and

communities. In today's reading, the challenges that farmers face draw Jesus' attention, and once more he makes that interesting statement, "the kingdom of heaven like"...a farmer who faithfully planted but this time, weeds seemly intentionally planted, grew up and become a threat. The neighbours even get involved: "didn't you use the right seeds?!"

These neighbours offer to help resolve the problem, by pulling out the weeds, but the farmer stops them. When I first tackled my back yard garden beds that had been ignored for several years I would have welcomed help. This farmer stops them, and suggests they be allowed to grow, in case the wheat too is mistakenly yanked out of the soil. Later he will separate them, at a more appropriate time. The farmer seems to another time in mind – maybe a better time, certainly, in the sower's good time.

There's wisdom here, we know. As a parable the hidden secrets of nature being made known for those who take time to reflect. The church has heard this parable of the wheat and weeds as wisdom for the life of the church. It is about discipleship, intended for those within the faith community. It is addressed to you and I. Let's look closer.

Found only in Matthew, the imagery of seed is central as in the parable before it. Only this time there are two kinds of seed – polar-opposites – the good and not-so-good – to be more blunt as the story-teller is – the good and the bad! The challenges it addresses are not the typical evangelistic concerns of reception (will my message be accepted or rejected?) and possible persecution (will I lose face/ get in trouble?) but that of an enemy intentionally planting disciples or ‘evil’ in the community of faith. This evil presence leaves the neighbourhood edgy and perplexed as to where the weeds came from, questioning the ‘sower’ himself – did he use the right seed? Farmers today would understand this response. The kinds of seeds, the seed companies we order them from, is important. Regardless, the potential for conflict and further problems pushes the community to simply want to ‘get rid of the problem’ – pull out the weeds. But the sower urges patience! The disciples are left uncomfortable and ask for clarity.

Those of us who have been part of a faith community all our lives, have not been able to avoid conflict/struggle that is so often a part of relationships – especially as our faith communities became increasingly more diverse. It’s unavoidable even when some of us try awfully hard to avoid the rough edges of living and growing together. Who has not wrestled with the paradoxical character of a congregation, where committed members with perceptive visions about what the church ought to be and to do exist side by side with those who seem indifferent and who apparently are motivated only by self-interest? We know

how such tension can affect the whole congregation.

We know too the church is forever troubled with boundaries – some clearly defined and some implied. Who is accepted/not accepted and why not? Who do we let in and who must remain out? We may not even be aware of these boundaries but they are there. Outsiders feel them most often. And in the very act of asking such questions we so often assume that it is our job to draw up the specifications regarding the wideness of the church’s welcome. How wide, really, can it be, and still be the church? That’s when the Sower of Matthew’s parable has greater wisdom: “No, he says, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together...because one cannot always tell about these plants. Paul and I had over sprayed for a problem in our garden – I cleaned out the hurting leaves thinking I had lost the plant, but decided I’d leave the center stem, just in case. I discovered a week later new shoots and leaves coming and shortly after, full fruit! You never know, the sower’s love persists in saying today. We think we know, only to discover that our premature assumptions can get in the way of growth.

We are called as ‘church’ to imitate Jesus, to follow where Jesus leads us, to present the face of Christ to the world, and certainly, to act in Jesus’ name, according to his command of love. That’s the rub. This acting the way Jesus would, doing what Jesus would. And we know that recent criticism of the church cuts at our very humanity. When the outside world criticizes the church, its history, the way it sometimes acts today - my own

children will - I remind them we are a human institution and yet, I am called to persist /remain faithful. We know the church is not yet the fulfillment of God's promised reign. God is not finished with us yet! We are a mixed body of believers and this mix expresses it in our relationships with each other and in the world.

Part holy, part unholy, part wheat and part weed, part fruitful and potentially harmful we are called to push forward into the future, taking the risk of discipleship.

We leave the sorting to a greater wisdom and tend rather here as a community and as individuals to that which increases the potential for holiness. We come together, here in this place, to be drawn closer to all that is holy within and between us. Jeff expressed it in the worship invitation "These are some of the ways we are trying to live out our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ", despite the persistent criticisms, despite the challenges among us, and despite the hostility in the midst of today's scepticism.

We gather because of the Sower, the one who sows the seed. Because the very character of the sower is patient lover, a persistent grower and nurturer of seeds like you and I. We come together because this sower, as Psalm 139 expresses it, knows each one of us and loves us into being who we are meant to be - this God searches, discerns, - nothing is hidden; all is held in God's firm, loving and active embrace. We come together because we hear God's "I love you" and because God promises, "Know that I am with you and will keep you". Here we

grow together in the loving care and faithful persistence/nurturing of the Sower's guidance. Here the sower calls us all together, mixed bag and all, into the ministry that is Christ-like, in the life of the church and for the sake of the world.

This particular parable never quite resolves the anxiety. It is important in it's ambiguous message to notice that it is bracketed by that beautiful parable about the merchant who sells all he has to purchase "one pearl of great value" and the parable of another merchant who discovers buried treasure in a field and goes quickly to buy the field. We are reminded that there is something here among us that takes us beyond the challenges into confident risk and hope and venture, of discovering what is truly valuable, of persistence in the pursuit of the coming reign of God.

This story parable acknowledges that there is a holy and purposeful ambiguity within the community of disciples. It is both wise and intentional. God here is infinitely more patient than you or I and frees us to simply get on with the crucial business of loving, or at least living well with each other. And in this new space created by such patience, such love, we ourselves are welcomed into a larger reality - we are 'reborn', not once but over and over and over again. We are transformed. In my acknowledged humanity, I response "Thanks be to God" and pray that it may be so among us.

May such a welcoming, open, patient grace thrive in us, around us, and even miraculously, sometime through us! And we know that God is happy to let all of it grow together into some future joy, into abundant harvest.

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