



Pentecost 8 (A) – Proper 11

[RCL] Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23 or Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 or Isaiah 44:6-8; Psalm 86:11-17; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

Let Both Grow Together

Of the parables Jesus tells, the one about the weeds growing among the wheat can be especially troubling. In many readers' opinion, what we would prefer to have happen, at least initially, is what the farm hands are ready to do: pull up the weeds, throw them out, see the world free from the latest set of scumbags, and do it all immediately! But that is not how the story goes. The landowner won't allow such direct action. We need to look at the story more carefully to understand why.

Let's look at the weeds first. The gardeners among us may raise a suspicious eyebrow at the idea of not pulling out the weeds until harvest time. Certainly this is no way to run a farm!

But consider that the weeds that have grown up in the wheat field are an annual grass that looks very much *like* wheat. Distinguishing one from another in the early stages of growth is practically impossible. Moreover, as the plants mature, the roots of weeds and wheat intertwine and become almost inseparable. Yet separating them is necessary. Unless the weeds are removed, the flour made from the wheat will be ruined by the weeds, which are both bitter and mildly toxic. The usual solution is to harvest the plants, spread them on a flat surface, and *then* remove the weeds, which by this time are a different color than the wheat.

So the weeds can be separated only at the proper time, *following* the harvest. This brings us to what the landowner says, "Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

This teaching now makes sense to us, hopefully, in the context of wheat growing in a field where there are also weeds.

Where it dismays us is elsewhere in the *world*. Looking at the news, it might seem to many of us that weeds are growing like crazy in the wheatfield of the world! There are plants we may want to yank out by the roots.

We want the field of the world to flourish with wheat, and not to be troubled with weeds. That does not seem too much to ask.

The pervasive evil in the world can lead to rage, a feeling of impotence, even despair about God: Why doesn't God do something about these people? Where is God when people commit horrible crimes?

The parable does not deny that there are weeds in the wheat. It does not suggest for a moment that the world is free from evil. Instead, the weeds are only too visible. The landowner knows what's happened: "An enemy has done this!" Yes, the world is a terrible, broken place. What is meant to be a wheat field is hosting countless weeds.

And yet we hear from the landowner this instruction: "Let both grow together until the harvest." This may perplex us. This may baffle us. It sounds like the landowner is resigned to letting his fertile field become little more than a weed patch.

As we have looked carefully at the weeds, now we must look carefully at a word. The word is one which is often rendered "let": "Let both grow together until the harvest." The original Greek word has a wide range of meanings. One major meaning is "let" as in the sense of "pardon" or "forgive." It is with this meaning that the word appears in the Lord's Prayer, in that sentence where we say, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

This parable invites us to the patience of discipleship. The very real evil that others do is not to be answered by pulling out the weeds, by attacking and destroying the people responsible. Doing so only adds to the harm. Instead, our response is to be one of forgiveness, and a willingness to trust in the purposes of God who will winnow the wheat and the weeds at the harvest time. The passage goes on to explain that once this harvest is in, the weeds will be recognized for what they are and thrown into the fire. There's mercy, yes, but there's also justice.

Why this delay, then? Everywhere in the world, the weeds and the wheat are growing together, sometimes in dramatic, horrible ways; sometimes in ugly, everyday ways. Why not do something about it now? St. Augustine, in commenting on this parable asks and answers the same question: "There is this difference between people and real grain and real weeds, for what was grain in the field is grain and what were weeds are weeds. But in the Lord's field, which is the Church, at time what was grain turns into weeds, and at times what were weeds turn into grain; and no one knows what they will be tomorrow."

God gives us all amazing latitude to make choices, to do right, even to do wrong, to the point of inflicting grievous harm on others and on ourselves. Often we would like the Lord to hurl thunderbolts—only at our enemies, of course. But the record indicates that God works differently than that.

The most convincing entry in this record is the story of Jesus. Nowhere does he even suggest that in this life we get paid back in kind for the evil we have done. Instead, he goes around telling strange and scandalous parables about patience and forgiveness, like the one about a landowner who suffers the weeds and wheat to grow together through the many months leading up to harvest.

But Jesus doesn't rest content with parables. When his enemies nail him to the cross, he forgives them. Risen from the dead, he forgives those disciples who skipped out in his hour of need, and he sets them up in the business of spreading his forgiveness to anybody who needs it—which is to say everybody.

Forgiveness and forbearance are God's way of working with our broken world.

Our preoccupation with the problem of weeds must not prevent us from recognizing the wondrous conclusion of the parable: how indeed the harvest happens, an abundance of wheat is gathered in, enough to make landowner and farm hands rejoice together. And so the parable ends on a note of brilliant triumph about that harvest: "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father!"

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