



A Season for Growing

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, July 20, 2008*

Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43:

Another parable Jesus put before the crowds saying: “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!”

Before I can get to what I perceive to be the heart of Jesus’ parable, I need to clear some things up. This is a busy text: a lot of different roles, a lot of action. And there appears to me to be an extra voice, an additional role, or somebody, in the narrative—a voice that dominates and skews the rest. Permit me a moment as I try to sort this out.

Well before the oppressive heat of mid-summer, picture dark moist earth of early spring, fresh-tilled for planting. We’re told that the kingdom of God is like someone who planted good seed in her field, but while she slept an enemy came and planted bad seed—weeds, and both grew up together. The slaves came to the owner and asked if she had not planted good seed and where had these weeds come from? “An enemy has done this,” was the reply. “Shall we go and pull the weeds then?” they ask. “No, for the weeds and the wheat are indiscernible, one from the other, and you will accidentally yank the good plants along with the bad. Let them grow. When it is time for harvest, the reapers will be able to tell the difference, will pull and burn the weeds, and harvest the wheat.”

The voice here that troubles me is that of the slaves. When Jesus took his disciples aside and explained the parable to them, he made it clear that the field is the world, this life. The good seed are people, good people planted by God. The bad seed are also people, bad people planted by the devil. The harvest, Jesus explains, is the end of the age, and the reapers, who will be able to discern bad from good at the end, are angels. In the explanation, Jesus says not a word about those slaves who, while apparently desirous to be helpful and do the landowner’s bidding, are eager to pluck up and toss out those nasty plants they perceive to be harmful. In my view, their voice, while veiled in obedience, is the voice of judgment, as in a voice judging that you’re okay, you’re not so hot and you’re hopelessly lost. In the explanation, Jesus seems to address, even assuage that voice: in effect, he says, don’t worry, those nasty weeds planted by the devil; they’ll get theirs; they’ll fry in the end! Somebody seems to need that reassurance—perhaps so they can leave the judging of others well enough alone.

For me this parable presents a problematic world view—with some inherently evil, others inherently good. I suppose I should not worry over much; parables are not intended to be taken literally, not intended to be accurate description of actual situations. Parables are designed to awaken, startle, teach, reveal, prompt us to discover something—about ourselves, about God, our relationship with God.

But even if we accept the image, all of us—wheat and weeds—growing cheek by jowl in this loamy earth of God’s great giving. And even if there will be a final judgment, a harvest at the end, who are the one’s so anxious to come rifling among us and pluck out the bad? Who is that? The landowner’s slaves? Who is that? If you were directing this parable for performance, who get’s to say those lines and who is it that feels so reassured and justified when they learn that some of us are going to be judged and it won’t be pretty.

Who says it? The voice of judgment. The voice within each of us that looks and measures weeds and wheat, assesses human worth. That’s the other voice, dominant, pervasive in the narrative. It’s a loud voice. Jesus teaches so that that voice might be silenced.

I spent three days this past week with my 17-year-old son, Nick, looking at colleges. We drove west through Pennsylvania, up into Ohio, then ditched our rental car and flew home. Five colleges in 800 miles. Flying back, *we* had to pass judgment, go through security at Port Columbus airport in our bare feet, show them our toiletries in a clear plastic bag, as they sought to pluck out the terrorists from among us on that flight; one fellow got a pretty thorough going-over. (For all I know he deserved it; bad plant stock).

For Nick, the whole experience involved being judged—being examined like shoppers considering fresh fruit at the market, squeezing and sniffing for freshness, wary of bruise and blemish—your grades, your SAT scores, your extracurricular activities; how’s that handshake? How many cavities? And it can be tough to tell with a 17-year-old boy, how they’re going to come out—weeds and wheat—there’s fruit and poison all in the one plant, so far as I can tell. The colleges will make their choices, no doubt harvesting a mixed crop. Being judged is no fun, but the more harmful activity is when we’re judging others, sizing up peers, neighbors, even friends. I no longer remember the specifics of the legislation being debated back when I lived in New York, but it no doubt had to do with allocating benefits for the neediest in our society, because I remember Governor Mario Cuomo saying, “How dare we be in the position of deciding who to leave behind!”

Silence that voice of judgment roaming the fertile lands of our society and our psyches. Give it no mind. Let the angels of God sort it out as they will at the last. As we strip away the voice of judgment, the sense of anxiousness to judge others, what image remains? That of a field—and a garden of plants trying to grow the best we know how.

Maybe some of us are weeds and some of us are wheat. It doesn’t sound like there’s an easy way to tell, and there’s nothing to be done for it until harvest time anyway. So, leave the judging to the angels of God.

In the meantime, we need to be about the business of growing and producing the fruit that we are created to bear. Some commentators would suppose that these images of planting and harvesting are becoming foreign to us in our urban industrialized, computerized society. But I don’t think so. We know about growing. We know each of us, that deep within there are living seeds of God’s love, tender hopes and dreams, struggling to find the rich soil, the moisture deep below; reaching upward for the sunlight needed to grow through the tangle of life’s hardships, insecurities and anxieties. This is the heart of Jesus’ parable: do not worry today about the evil or the good of those whom you are with; rather, tend to your own important work of growing and bearing fruit.

As Nick wends his way through the exams and hurdles of those who would measure his worth, my prayer for him—as for each of us—is to flourish with our own special blossoms, to be true to the seeds of life planted within us.

I want to close with a poem by Mary Oliver. It is from her most recent volume titled *Red Bird* (Beacon, 2008). She has a gift of expressing the fertility and vibrancy of life. The poem is “Sometimes”:

1.

Something came up
out of the dark.
It wasn’t anything I had ever seen before.
It wasn’t an animal
 or a flower,
unless it was both.
Something came up out of the water.
 a head the size of a cat
but muddy and without ears.
I don’t know what God is.
I don’t know what death is.
But I believe they have between them
 some fervent and necessary arrangement.

2.

Sometimes
melancholy leaves me breathless.

3.

Later I was in a field full of sunflowers.
I was feeling the heat of midsummer.
I was thinking of the sweet, electric
drowse of creation,
when it began to break.
In the west, clouds gathered.
Thunderheads.
In an hour the sky was filled with them.
In an hour the sky was filled
with the sweetness of rain and the blast of lightning.
Followed by the deep bells of thunder.
Water from the heavens! Electricity from the source!
Both of them mad to create something!
The lightning brighter than any flower.
The thunder without a drowsy bone in its body.

4.

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

5.

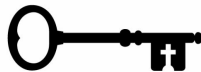
Two or three times in life I discovered love.
Each time it seemed to solve everything.
Each time it solved a great many things
but not everything.
Yet left me as grateful as if it had indeed, and
thoroughly, solved everything.

6.

God, rest in my heart
and fortify me,
take away my hunger for answers,
let the hours play upon my body
like the hands of my beloved.
Let the cathead appear again—
the smallest of your mysteries,
some wild cousin of my own blood probably—
some cousin of my own wild blood probably—
in the black dinner bowl of the pond.

7.

Death waits for me, I know it, around
one corner or another
This doesn't amuse me.
Neither does it frighten me.
After the rain, I went back into the field of sunflowers.
It was cool, and I was anything but drowsy.
I walked slowly, and listened.
to the crazy roots, in the drenched earth, laughing and
growing.



Open hearts. Open minds.