

Isa. 44:6-8, Ps. 86:11-17

Sermon

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Rom. 8:12-25

By

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Matt. 13:24-30,36-43

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A few weeks ago, my wife and I attended for the first time a concert that was part of the Brevard Music Center Summer Festival. The concert was a tribute to the Beatles, and included the whole spectrum of their music, from “A Hard Day’s Night,” to “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” to “Abbey Road”, and more! Having grown up in the 60’s and 70’s, we caught ourselves boisterously singing along and all but dancing in the aisle. The audience was filled with bald-headed and gray-haired hippies. I may have even spotted someone wearing a pair of old bellbottoms, but my eyesight isn’t what it used to be. Now to those who were a part of this era, if asked to define the word “weed,” you would have no problem, right?

You would most likely agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson, that a weed is “a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered.” Or, as Webster’s defines it, “A plant that is not valued where it is growing and usually of vigorous growth,” ... “that tends to choke out more desirable plants.”

Today’s reading from Matthew’s Gospel focuses on Jesus’ parable of the “Weeds and the Wheat.” As does many of Jesus’s teachings, it incorporates that which the Israelites were familiar with in their daily lives, including farming - growing crops and hoping for a good harvest. Jesus states that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a farmer who sowed good seed in the field, but while everyone was sleeping, an enemy secretly sowed weeds among the wheat and then slipped away.

When the plants had grown up and began to produce grain, the slaves who worked in the field noticed the weeds among the wheat and reported this to the land owner.

It may seem odd to us that the weeds were not identified earlier, but a weed common to that time was one named “Bearded Darnel,” also known as “wheat’s evil twin.” It is a mimic weed that looks and behaves much like wheat, and one cannot be distinguished from the other until mature. The seeds of Bearded Darnel can cause anything from hallucinations to death, and was added to beer even in Shakespeare’s time for the intoxicating effect. Not so dissimilar from the properties of the weed some balding hippies may be familiar with, or so I’ve heard!

But one property of bearded darnel is that its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up the nutrients and water, making it impossible to root out without damaging the good crop, the desired wheat. So when the slaves asked the farmer if he wanted them to gather the weeds, it was with real knowledge and wisdom that the farmer instructed his workers: “Let [the weeds and wheat] 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.’ ”

In telling this parable and then interpreting it for his disciples, Jesus teaches them three important lessons. The first is that evil is real and in the world. When asked where the weeds came from, Jesus responds: “An enemy has done this,” and later states, “the enemy who sowed them is the devil.” Any of us who have found scams planted in our email and malware sowed into our computers know that the seeds of evil continue to be planted all around us. Such evil is not to be ignored or

left unopposed, rather, we should carefully consider the best way forward. How often have we witnessed the destruction of that which is meant to be saved by the attempt to root out evil? Soldiers on both sides of a conflict are killed in wars, towns demolished, and innocent blood spilled. Our interdependency is often underestimated when we take action against those we think we can live without, then belatedly discovering the effects of our actions on the world food chain, the global economy, fuel supplies, or climate change. And, who are we to distinguish the good from the evil without real soul searching, or the insight of God? So Jesus instructed his followers, “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.” God, Jesus teaches, is the ultimate judge who will deal with evil.

It follows that the second lesson taught through this parable is the need for patience. In the Litany of Penitence found in the Ash Wednesday Service of our Book of Common Prayer, one petition reads: “We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives.” Today, more than ever, we have a proclivity toward impatience. When we see that with which we disagree, we want to demonize it, ostracize it, and destroy it. Our culture has produced a technology that feeds its desire for instant gratification. To patiently wait for the weeds to grow up with the wheat would be an exercise many of us today would find unbearable, if not unthinkable. But in his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that as adopted children of God, we are heirs to a future beyond our sight. What we will one day receive from our creator and redeemer is not what we now see. Certainly, the way things are now contains enough pain and

suffering to make one “groan inwardly,” as Paul writes. Even if one is optimistic and sees

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the glass half full, it is a long way from a cup running over, one author observes. But, one of the fruits of the Spirit that we have received as children of God is hope, and with hope comes patience.

The 21st century in the United States is coming to resemble more and more the era of Jesus’ followers. The church is not the center of our society. Attendance in mainline churches continues to decrease. Those who claim a spiritual life are replacing those who claim a religious affiliation. Christianity is becoming a counter culture and the mission field is no longer overseas, but across the street. So, for those of us who live in the already-and-not yet, knowing that God’s kingdom has broken in through Christ’s incarnation but has not been fully realized, hope and patience is needed more than ever!

This leads to the third lesson Jesus’ parable of the weeds and wheat teaches us - to have faith that God alone will ultimately triumph. Because evil is in the world and real, there are times when the weeds may overtake the wheat, times when evil will prevail over the good. Through our nearsightedness, we may lose a distant perspective. We may forget who created us and all the world, who provides the rain, the sun, and makes the crops to grow. The prophet Isaiah bears witness to the fall of the Israelites to the Babylonians as a result of their refusal to trust God. They forgot who delivered them from bondage in Egypt, who provided them food and water in the wilderness, and who led them into the Promised Land! To judge God on the basis of their exile into Babylon is not a fair judgement at all, suggests

Isaiah. As if defending himself in a court of law, God proclaims through the prophet: “I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god... Who has

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announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it?”

Isaiah reminded the Israelites residing in a foreign land, to remember who they were and whose they were. They were once nobody, no people. Through God’s mercy, they became somebody, some people, God’s chosen people! And likewise, through baptism in Christ Jesus, we have become somebody, children of God, a god who will ultimately prevail. When we bear witness to this faith and knowledge, regardless of our present circumstances, certainly others will come to see and believe as well.

As we overcome our spiritual nearsightedness and see more and more clearly who we are and whose we are, we can also begin to connect the dots theologically and see that the redemption and salvation that God offers, regardless of our current situation, is to be formed by God’s steadfast and saving love, not by the rewards of our circumstantial and temporal existence. In fact, God’s abiding and providential care is less about changing our present life circumstances and more about changing us, our inward being. As the psalmist asks of God, we would do well to pray: “Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; knit my heart to you that I may fear your Name.” With such inward knowledge and faith, we will know the joy and peace that comes from the Spirit, and be able to live with hope and patience in our Lord, even when weeds are sown among the wheat and threaten our

crop, or we find ourselves living in exile in a foreign land, or become victims of injustice.

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And then perhaps, just perhaps, when we are tempted to start ripping out the weeds and unknowingly destroy the whole crop, the very fabric of our lives, we can be comforted by the words of a song I recently sang with a rowdy bunch of baldheaded hippies:

“When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be

And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me

Speaking words of wisdom, let it be

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be

Whisper words of wisdom, let it be

And when the broken hearted people living in the world agree

There will be an answer, let it be

For though they may be parted, there is still a chance that they will see

There will be an answer, let it be”