
Sermon

[Click here for the podcast](#)

Homily from The Rev. Bill Harkins
10 Pentecost
July 20, 2008
The Cathedral of St. Philip
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this 10th Sunday after Pentecost, a day on which we hear the parable of the weeds and the wheat. As parables so often do, this one takes us in surprising directions, and we are like the disciples asking, what does this really mean? How do we know what are weeds, and what is wheat? Reading the morning paper these days can be an exercise in courage fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. We risk exposing ourselves to all manner of cautionary tales, bad news, bleak forecasts. What often seems to bubble up from the collective unconscious of our culture is a tendency, in our anxiety, to create a world of good guys vs. bad guys, either/or, black and white. It is a recipe for more anxiety, for relegating those who are different from us—who express different opinions or don't like our perspective, to the status of the other, the stranger. Yes, ours is a time of discontent, if not downright mean-spiritedness. We are an anxious nation in a post-9/11 world. It is an election year in a time of economic uncertainty, and we remain a country at war. If one is Episcopalian one finds additional issues to fret about. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was quoted as saying that he feels "great grief" that more than 200 Bishops are boycotting Lambeth Conference, the once-a-decade gathering of the Anglican Fellowship now underway, where our Bishops are representing us. "I don't imagine that simply building relationships solves our problems," he was quoted in the New York Times as saying on Friday, "but the nature of our calling as Christians is such that we dare not, and I say very strongly, dare not pretend that we can meet and discuss without attention to this quality of relation with each other even if we disagree." It seems that some weeding out is already taking place at Lambeth.

And so we hear the in today's Epistle from Paul and in the Gospel of Matthew big picture views of all this. In hearing the texts we see that perhaps this anxiety and dis-ease are not unique to our time, though they may find expression in unique ways. All of creation, Paul reminds us, is waiting for healing and fulfillment with what Ronald Rolheiser called a Holy Longing, a desire for something sacred to ground us amidst our anxiety. In the parable Jesus tells there is a similar kind of "not yet-ness" and longing in the image of an imperfect, weed riddled field, waiting to be sorted out.

It is seductive to think of this field as "out there" somewhere, a distant place serving only as a vague metaphor of our troubled times. Yet I wonder if we might consider this field as a metaphor of our souls, what grows there, and what we acknowledge and say out loud, and what we'd prefer to keep secret. This is a parable of which the psychologist and amateur theologian Carl Jung would likely have approved. Jung gave much thought to what he called the "shadow side." Jung was not unacquainted with the weeds that grow in the fields that are our souls. The unconscious shadow, in the form of these weedy aspects of ourselves that we repress because we don't want to acknowledge they are there, can haunt us, or can be used to inform us, to deepen and enrich our lives. Learning to live with the weeds in the fields of our souls can, Jung believed, lead to insight and transformation; to reconciliation with the "otherness" of our own shadow side; to wholeness as a gift, a consequence of a faithfulness in relation to the richness and complexity of life, and a delight in life as a gracious gift, weeds and all.

Sometimes it is very difficult indeed to tell the difference between weeds and wheat. This is equally true for botanists as it is for psychologists. In the parable, the weeds—the tares—are "bearded darnel," mentioned only in Matthew. It is called *Lolium temulentum*, a species of rye-grass, and the seeds have a soporific effect and are poisonous. Growing in Palestine and Syria, it bears a very close resemblance to wheat until the "ears" appear. Taking a hoe to this weed is problematic indeed, because good and bad look so much alike. Only later can one tell the difference.

Likewise, as a mental health professional I can think of examples of this. There are times, for example, when depression or even a serious disorder can be a person's way of calling attention to something important, something that needs to be healed, and aching to become whole. It takes patience and courage for example to recognize that depression can sometimes have its own integrity. It looks and feels so much like a weed, but at times it may be calling us to pay attention to something more closely resembling nourishing wheat. This kind of patience is terribly difficult in a culture of anxiety and immediate gratification. Jung believed that the irritating "surprises, annoyances, mysteries, stresses, conflicts, paradoxes, and irrationalities of life, which are often regarded as evil or alien and which are shunned or subdued in a shortsighted attempt to make life more 'perfect' are in fact authentic, valid, meaningful, and constructive parts of the endowment of life, to be consciously named, welcomed, deliberately befriended." To strive for a perfect, weed free field, Jung might say, is not the goal. Such a striving for perfection constricts and limits us. Rather, we are striving towards wholeness. "Dreams, puzzling coincidences, competing tendencies within our souls, even fits of rage and "neurotic" fears are some of the intrusive irrationalities about which Jung learned to be curious rather than fearful. There is a bigger picture, largeness to life that was his equivalent to a doctrine of grace. It resonates with St. Augustine's emphasis on the redemptive power resident in creation, in the movement of the Holy Spirit in creation and his subordination of the question of "evil" to the question of "being." And so it is with Jesus' parable this morning. Shakespeare knew this when he said, "That time of year thou may'st in me behold, when yellow leaves, or none, or few hang upon those boughs which brace against the cold, bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang." He is telling his beloved that he has a shadow side not unlike the bare limbs of trees as winter approaches, a wintry side to his spirit, and that in saying it out loud he is not alarmed by it, and neither should she be, it is so human, and is part of what it means to be finite, indeed part of what it means to live, and to die, in grace. "Someone I loved once gave me a boxful of darkness," Mary Oliver wrote, "It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift." What is wheat, and what are weeds? Perhaps the larger question for us is whether we have the patience to wait for the kingdom to come, rather than forcing it ourselves. In an age of anxiety, do we have that kind of wisdom, patience, and faith? I wonder.

In the just released film "The Dark Knight" a film about the moral ambiguity of good versus evil—Bruce Wayne struggles with his Batman shadow side, and the weeds and wheat are difficult indeed to sort out. An argument can be made that the person in the film who most closely resembles Batman, a vigilante for justice, is the Joker as Mephistopheles, a vigilante for chaos. Both characters are cut off, alone, and tragic. Bruce Wayne's tragedy is the isolation borne of his heroic if ultimately misguided efforts to separate the wheat from the weeds, and to do so alone. He thereby cuts himself off from the possibility of intimacy in community. His isolation is the price of his hubris. He recognizes his shadow side in the form of his anger and rage at the deaths of his parents, but his working out of it leads not to grace, but to a conflicted and lonely existence. "Yes," he seems to say from beneath the mask, "I will take it upon myself to separate the weeds from the wheat. If I don't, who will?" His answer is its own reward.

In contrast, for those among us who prefer history to film criticism, we find the example of Abraham Lincoln. In his first inaugural address, staring down the barrel of the cannon already poised at Fort Sumter, he said to the anxious nation, "Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every hearthstone all over this land, will yet swell with the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." "Think carefully, he said, echoing Jesus in this parable, "nothing can be lost by taking time." Don't be so quick to separate out the weeds, he was saying to an anxious nation. We have it within each of us our better angels, and our lesser demons. We must be discerning about both. Here was one well acquainted with his shadow side. Later, at Gettysburg, he reminded us that the last full measure of devotion is in the service of a vision of freedom "of the people, by the people, and for the people," and that this was nothing if not about recognizing the entire field—those who fought and died there—regardless of their cause. Weeds and wheat were a complicated matter. Lincoln knew this in the depths of his soul, and we should be mindful, lest in our hubris we consign some to the compost pile of fire, and in so doing take upon ourselves a mantle of judgment meant only for God. And then there is the remarkable second inaugural, an address as unlikely as the political victory that gave rise to it, in which he said

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds." Both sides read the same Bible and prayed to the same God, he reminded us, but let us judge not, lest we be judged. And so it goes and so it is, with Lincoln and with each of us.

With old honest Abe, we must learn to wait and to pay attention, in a culture of anxiety and immediate gratification we risk weeding out the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, and we put at risk God's promise to do the sorting out. My reaction to the needy weedy people I'd rather dig out of my life because truth told, I'd rather not deal with them is often a product of the fact that they are pointing to something in myself I'd rather not see, rather not acknowledge, the shadow side I'd rather not, confess. Sometimes hidden among our weeds are the seeds of our transformation, the wheat of flourishing new life. In an age of anxiety, suspicion, and paranoia, we do not have to give into the either/or, all or nothing position in relation to the world. Sadness, anger, loss, guilt, remorse, compassion""these are all emotions and states of being that can at times appear very weed-like, and yet serve to remind us that we are not omnipotent, and we do not have to split off these weedy feelings from what it means to be a whole human being, before God, in Christ.² We can let the weeds and the wheat co-exist in dialectic tension, and trust that God will sort it all out, by and by. Bruce Wayne's life is split off into disconnected parts because he has remained in a state of regression in response to his loss and anger. We have other choices. We have each other. We have this community of faith. In our church we say "Almighty God to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you, no secrets are hid." This is an acknowledgment of the weeds, and the wheat, in transparent community. Yes, we have something Bruce Wayne does not have, we have community; we have church; we have those who love us, and abide with us. We don't have to work as a vigilante, in isolation, alone, and lonely, unable to connect. We have each other, and we have God, and as Episcopalians we have prayer, which is always where we begin, and end. We have Mary Oliver praying for us and with us: "It doesn't have to be the blue iris, it could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones; just pay attention, then patch a few words together and don't try to make them elaborate, this isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak." Amen.

1 Dittes, J., in the Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, Analytical Psychology and Pastoral Care, pp. 29-33, Abingdon Press.

2 Patton, J. in The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling, "Suspiciousness and Paranoia," pp. 1246-1247, Abingdon Press. This article is a helpful reference, especially in making the distinction between pathology and a more general insight into the human condition as it pertains to these symptoms.

Comments? Contact Bill Harkins at: BHarkins@stphilipscathedral.org