

“Life in the Weeds”

*But he said, “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.
Let both grow together until the harvest” (Matthew 13:29-30).*

One of the occupational hazards of working with young people is the temptation to prematurely pass judgment on a kid. If you’ve ever been a teacher or a coach or led any kind of youth organization I guarantee that right now as I’m speaking you could name one or two kids that drove you absolutely crazy. After teaching and coaching hundreds of kids over the last 22 years, my list is a lot longer than one or two and, this week as I was checking my email, one of those names appeared in my inbox.

This was a kid who played soccer for me twenty years ago and no matter how much personal attention and encouragement I gave this young man, he was completely uninterested in anything I tried to tell him. He’d roll his eyes at my instructions, he’d make excuses for his bad behavior and he would often flat out defy me and do whatever he wanted. About the only way I could get through to this kid was physical pain and he spent a lot of time running wind sprints for me after practice.

With such a turbulent history you can imagine my surprise when I opened his email and read these words: “Coach, I’m in Ft Wayne this week visiting family (so) I stopped by Concordia to show my wife and kids our sectional champ pictures. They were proud of (their) daddy...I now live in Greenville, South Carolina with my wife and two kids (plus one on the way). I’m a software engineer for a large health system and serve as a volunteer at my church. Thank you for the values you instilled on our team. You were a great coach.”

This experience was convicting to me and it was also a great reminder that when it comes to people, we always have to take the long view. Pulling from the language of today’s text St. Augustine once wrote, “They who today are weeds tomorrow may be wheat.” There’s a lot of truth in that statement and we have to understand that God does not give up on us and the promises made in Baptism are real and they are effective and we should never make judgments about the ultimate condition and destination of another. And this is one of the most important messages in today’s Gospel lesson.

In this reading from Matthew 13, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who sowed good seed in his field. Then, while he was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed weeds in the field. When the weeds and the wheat began to grow together the servants came to the master and said, “Did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?” When the master replied that an enemy had done this, the conscientious servants asked, “Then do you want us to go and gather the weeds?” And this was a completely logical question for them to ask. Any reasonable gardener knows that you don’t allow weeds to grow in the garden. A field full of weeds simply won’t produce to its full potential. So the question of the servants was the right question and it was a good question and it’s here that Jesus turns our assumptions upside down. You see, the farmer answers his servants in a way that makes no sense. He tells them to leave the weeds alone and not to worry but to simply let the weeds and the wheat grow together, trusting that they will be separated at the harvest.

The implications of the master’s instructions are astounding. This approach means that the weeds in the field will get the same loving care as the wheat! The same sunshine! The same fertilizer! The same water! It seems like a total waste of resources and not only that, but if there’s one thing a good farmer can’t stand it’s a messy field. Farmers like clean fields and pure harvests and to have a field filled with nasty, gnarly weeds would be unthinkable...but not in this parable! At the master’s request, the wheat and the weeds grow together! And *this*, Jesus tells us, is what the “kingdom of heaven” is like (Matthew 13:24).

From the text, we don’t know how the crowd understood these confusing words, but as soon as Jesus and the disciples were away from the crowd, the disciples requested an explanation and, just as He had done earlier with the “Parable of the Sower,” Jesus interprets the meaning of this parable saying: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the

reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” and then in the harrowing words that conclude today’s reading Jesus boldly says to the disciples, “He who has ears, let him hear” (13:37-45).

As we process this explanation from Jesus there is a temptation to immediately begin wondering whether we are wheat or weeds. And instead of turning to the clear promises of God that point us to the cross of Christ and answer the question conclusively, we deal with the anxiety of this question by comparing ourselves to others and then identifying the people around us who in our estimation are clearly weeds. And the ugly truth is that we love to do this! We love to judge. We love to divide. We want to pull out the weeds and purify the field. And when we do this, we completely miss the point of the parable.

You see, if we believe the words of Jesus and take this story to be a parable about the kingdom of heaven, then by implication, it’s also a parable about the Church...and its meaning for us is very important. You see, this story teaches us that “the sons of the kingdom” and “the sons of the evil one” will grow side by side – even in the Church – and at times we won’t be able to tell the difference. And if we think being a Christian means that we should separate ourselves from the people *we* have judged to be sinners and to associate only with those who look good and do good and say good things, then we are setting *ourselves* up for judgment and we are missing the truth that God is creating life in the weeds.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, he was dealing with a group of people who looked a lot more like weeds than wheat and to this group of new believers Paul said, “do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ *And such were some of you.* But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6:9-11).

You see, this list of sins is a list that convicts every single one us! And the second we begin to stand back and separate ourselves from “those sinners out there” rather than speaking the Word of Christ that promises to bring forth a good harvest, then we have become enemies of the kingdom. Martin Luther once wrote: “If we proceed to establish a congregation in which there is no sin, we will condemn weak Christians, and even the strong because they stumble at times, and must also exclude them from the church.”

The truth behind this parable about the kingdom of heaven is that God has planted us! And the field in which we are growing is a messy and turbulent collection of saints and sinners who have absolutely nothing that holds us together outside of the risen Christ and the truth of the Risen Christ is that He humbled himself and took on our flesh. He lived in the weeds and not only did He associate with sinners but Scripture tells us that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Corinthians 5:21) – so *that we might be wheat!*

Our job is not to judge. Instead, the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel and enlightened us with His gifts so that we can trust in the promises of God, no matter how messy the field gets. And in our frustration we can remember the words of St. Peter which remind us that “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

What kind of crazy farmer would tolerate a field of weeds? It’s a farmer who loves to plant and grow and cultivate and harvest His wheat. It is a gracious Farmer who knows that there is life in the weeds. So don’t judge and don’t divide. Instead you can grow where God has planted you, trusting that today and tomorrow and in the weeks and months and years to come, the seed of God’s Word will continue to do what God has promised and that through your witness, the Holy Spirit will continue to create life in the weeds. Amen.

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