

Wheat or Weeds? By Tim Hall

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (A) – July 23, 2017

[RCL:] Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Last week the Gospel lectionary introduced the first of many parables found in Matthew. Jesus has moved on from the Sermon on the Mount, which we read in the opening weeks of the season after Pentecost, to curing the lame and the blind and raising the dead. And then he commissioned his disciples to go out into the world to spread the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven, telling them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.”

That’s Jesus telling them to ask the Lord to send them themselves out to do this work. And he’s telling us to do the same thing. We need to ask the Lord to use us in ways we may not know or understand to further his Kingdom. Then Jesus goes on to provide detailed instructions on carrying out this work... what the disciples should carry, how they should greet people, where they should stay... and even when they should get the heck out of Dodge! Yes, he tells them, the world can be a dangerous place and the going can be tough.

But he later reassures them that *with me as your companion you will have the strength and be able to accomplish great things in my name.* “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

And then, after all this healing and commissioning, Jesus began teaching the crowds with parables. Last week it was the Parable of the Sower. “Why have you begun speaking to the people in parables”, the disciples ask. He tells them that they, the disciples, have been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven but the people don’t easily understand and this is another way for Jesus to reach them, to paraphrase the prophecy from Isaiah that Jesus quotes... ***to open their ears to hearing and their eyes for seeing and their hearts to understanding.***

And then he draws the parallel between the parable of the sower and sowing of the word of the kingdom. Did you hear this parable last week? You remember... it’s the one where the man sows seed and some lands on the path, some on rocks, some among thorns, and some on fertile ground. The seed on fertile ground grows and flourishes but the other seed, essentially, withers and dies.

There are two lessons to be learned here. First, oh that our hearts and our lives would be the “good soil”, the *Spirit-filled soul soil*, so that we might hear and understand the word and bear fruit and yields far greater than what we receive.

And second, as sowers, oh that we would have the faith and courage to spread the word, the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven and salvation in Christ Jesus; and to cast this good news wildly – knowing that in some cases it may fall on rocky ground, or thin soil, or among thorns. But in so many other cases it will catch root and flourish abundantly.

Today we have the Parable of Weeds in the Wheat. On the surface it feels similar to the Parable of the Sower. Both use agricultural metaphors. Both compare and contrast good, healthy growth to corrupt, harmful growth. But while the Parable of the Sower speaks to us as

individuals, as the providers of our own Spirit-filled soul soil in which the word can flourish, the Parable of Weeds in the Wheat speaks to *us* as *part* of the larger world and the judgement that will be meted out in the last days. I'm sure in former times you might hear a preacher give a fire and brimstone message based on this reading... "Repent and turn ye to the Lord lest ye on the last day, like weeds, are burnt in the fires of eternal damnation!"

But don't worry. We're not going there this morning.

This parable is interesting from an agricultural viewpoint, because just as we wouldn't expect a sower to throw his valuable seed in places where it was sure not to grow, we don't expect a farmer to let the weeds, useless for food, to grow to maturity among the wheat, which when turned to bread was the mainstay of the ancient, Middle Eastern diet. But that's the amazing thing about Jesus' parables; he never tells you what you *expect* to hear. There's always a twist.

I know in my garden I try my best to root out the weeds at every turn. I'm not worried about them uprooting my other plants. As a matter of fact, I think it provides for good soil aeration. But it is a wonder to see how fast the weeds can shoot up and take over, often fooling me... is that something I planted? Just the other day I pulled a 4-foot weed out from among my Shasta Daisies. It was healthy and green and I felt sure it was something I had put there that was going to flower. But finally I realized it was probably never going to and would just spread its weed seed in places where I didn't want it. So out with it!

Earlier in the summer Judy and I found we had a profusion of something growing that looked pretty suspect to me and certainly grew as fast as a weed. I queried everyone who visited if they'd ever seen such a plant and could identify it. But to no avail. Many times I considered pulling it. But the patch was growing in a semi-circle of earth that I had turned the previous fall and I just wasn't sure what these plants might be. Well, in this case patience was rewarded and after growing to almost 5-feet tall these stalks started putting out alien looking pods which turned into the most beautiful, deep red Oriental Poppies. And then Judy and I remembered... we had gotten dried pods filled with poppy seeds from Alvin Clark when we were here in Alstead last summer and that fertile crescent of earth was where we had scattered them last fall. So you really can't tell how things will turn out sometimes.

We are all born into this broken world. A world where creation itself, even while providing so many good things, is yet given over to suffering and decay. Paul preaches about the kind of world where those who live in the flesh are condemned to a life of sin and death, but those who live in the Spirit, the spirit of life in Christ Jesus as children of God, taking others yokes upon them, can happily endure our present sufferings having hope in the glory about to be revealed, when creation itself will be set free.

Remember: the Gospel writers, the disciples, St. Paul, and the early Christians all believed that Christ's second coming was very near, perhaps even to occur in their own lifetimes. Well, it hasn't happened yet, although in the here and now we are living in the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, while still waiting for the Kingdom of God yet to come. The Parable of the Sower is about the Kingdom now, in the disciples' present lives and ours, and how we should prepare our hearts and souls to hear and accept and live the Good News that Jesus preached.

And the Parable of the Weeds in the Wheat is about the “not yet” Kingdom. This is what Jesus is telling us when he says that the angels will collect out of the kingdom all causes of sin and evildoers. Creation will be set right again.

Fifty years ago, President Lyndon Johnson launched what he called “the great society,” providing a social safety net, intending to uplift vulnerable Americans of all ages. He was trying to set things right again. A few years before Johnson’s Great Society, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the “beloved community,” where justice, compassion, and equality were the norm; in which people realize that their destinies were intertwined, just like the weeds in the wheat, and that **our** well-being depended on others’ successes.

Creation will be set right again. But **we** need to earn that final reward. We need to be a part of God’s redeeming plan for the world. I don’t believe the Lord wants to reap a field full of weeds to be thrown into the furnace. I believe the Lord wants to reap a field overflowing with wheat: One where evil has been overcome by good. I see a day, perhaps not in my lifetime or yours, or our children’s, but one day when the world will have overcome evil with virtue, prejudice with justice, competition with cooperation, slavery with service, hatred with love.

But it’s up to us, as workers in the kingdom, to further it every day: by sowing seeds of love, by welcoming the stranger, by forgiving others trespasses, by seeking forgiveness of our own, by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting the prisoners. In so doing we’ll be playing a critical role in making the world right again. And creation will be renewed to glory. As Jesus proclaims, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Now, in the words of this morning’s Psalm, let us pray...

Search me out, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my restless thoughts.  
Look well whether there be any wickedness in me and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

~Amen