

“Weeds, Seeds & the Kingdom”

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 19, 2020

N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman

Romans 8:12-23; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

“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 servants 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 servants 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.’”

We are back in the agriculture rich Galilee this week where fertile soil is the stuff of its fields. Not unlike where you and I live here in the Northern Neck surrounded by fields of things growing towards harvest. Even as we sit here in a grassy area for our out of doors service, surrounded by the farming fields of Sabine Hall, today we are part of a story line with sowers and seeds and soil yet again. Last week we considered what it was like to dress up as sowers or types of soil. This week Jesus offers his listeners the chance to be cast as seeds in the drama of this stark parable. Imagine the scene back then and now. The stage is set. The crowds are spread out around Jesus on the field around them. They have come to hear what he has to sow in their lives. Weed and seed costumes are waiting to clothe the characters listening to him, waiting for his direction. The question hangs in the air: “Which are you going to be?”

This is a tough parable. It reads like judgment day is right around the corner. With characters in the drama about to enter stage left and stage right, some to drag away those of us in weed outfits towards a waiting fire pit and others to angelically guide those in wheat outfits towards a storage barn.

There’s good news and bad news about this parable today. The good news is that Jesus is clear, concise, and definite about what he is describing. The scene is simple and understandable to his audience – they “get” his images. The bad news is the consequences he describes. An either/or. Nothing in between. The weed gets destroyed in a hellish fire; the wheat is lovingly laid in a heavenly barn. The parable offers us no choice as to being weed or wheat because we are sowed as one or the other, as “children of the evil one, or “children of the kingdom.” Either I am a seed planted by something good or I am a seed planted by something evil. As the preacher today, and potentially weed or wheat, this makes me uncomfortable. So, did you notice how I worked a choice into the story line – the idea that we have a choice as to which we will be – clothed in a wheat seed pod costume or a weed pod costume. Given the outcome of being weed or wheat that Jesus describes who on earth would want to be a weed?

I believe we all like parables. They are little stories, almost like little videos with a message, because we can usually imagine the scene. We can watch and listen and take what we want to as a message from them or simply ignore the story as having no relevance to “my” life. However, parables are never as simple as it seems. They are like little “episodes” in a given “season” in an evolving Gospel series. We need to look at a parable within the bigger story line. And the Gospel (Good News) big story line, as we have come to know, is about sin but also about hope, redemption and saving grace.

Here goes.

At the disciples’ request Jesus interprets his parable to them, his inner circle. The field is the world. The plantings are “children.” Jesus sows the good seed in the world. The evil one sows the evil seed in the world. Both are allowed to grow. Not good to pull up anything too early because the roots are intertwined. Might pull up the good along with the bad. Let the seeds evolve till the time of “gathering” it all in – then separate the wheat from the chaff so to speak. The chaff put in the fire, the purifying fire. Keep the good stuff for when it is needed. Maybe to feed and nourish things, maybe to replant, maybe, maybe but to use to seed the “good” again.

The image is that we are children. Children do not come into the world at full stature. They grow over time. Their roots sink in to the soil, draw in what is healthy in the field, but also vulnerable to drawing in what is unhealthy. So, I’m fascinated by the image of all those roots, intertwined, and as the plants grow from their seeds they are, both wheat and weed, offered the same rain, and the same sun shine. What is available in the field (the world) both above ground and below ground is available to the good seed and the bad seed. I am wondering how each accesses and processes what is available – might there be a difference.

I am heartened by the idea that if the field we are growing in is the world, efforts to purify it (the world) is really worthwhile so that what is evil is not passed forward to reseed that field or others around it. That the goal is to build up what is good and nourishing to occupy more and more of the ground of the world in which we live and then grow into a harvest that is more good than evil.

I am also realistic enough to know that none of us are all one or the other (good or bad) but seem to evidence in our lives, good wheat-ness times and yucky weedy times. Personally, my life has been characterized by both. My guess is that most folks can identify with the same reality. I believe this is so because over time I am persuaded “theologically” (studying my life and my relationship with the world and with a Universal Divine Creator of all life) that I am composed of both human and divine elements and that my human elements seem to be vulnerable to some very weedy thoughts and actions, despite my desire to more often than not look and act like good wheat.

Other episodes in this Gospel season that spans ordinary time till we come to Advent will offer stories in which Jesus heals folks. When he calls out the demons in folks, where he touches what

has dis-eased their lives, what has withered them, choked out their voice, blocked their ears, overshadowed their sight. Jesus calls out what is dis-eased in us that we may thrive in the sunshine, feel the rain wash us clean and moisten our souls where the good seed waits, eager to thrive and grow. And Jesus' life and work evidences his efforts to work in the deep soil of the world where evil's roots compete with resources to help it thrive more than the roots of what is good in the field. Jesus is about both our individual health and the health of the systems which group within the larger fields of our "world."

So back to the question that waits for us all through the growing years of our life – from birth, through childhood which is probably made up of all the growth phases of our whole life till what is good of us is gleaned and what is not is set aside to be purified?

Maybe it is this – to choose over and over again to try and figure out what is good to flow with, what is good to be open to and take in more and more to nourish the goodness, the wheatness we want to become, and less and less that which contributes to our weedy-ness.

I sense that Jesus is looking out over that hillside in Galilee at all the folks there, not pointing a finger at them, labeling them as wheat or weed. But he is standing there with both compassion and focused intention. He wants to be the sower of their lives. He wants to be the sower of our lives, as we are gathered here listening to his message. The reality is that the "evil one" is ever near waiting for the opportune time to snatch us and claim us as its seed. Jesus is saying, do not fall asleep to this reality. This parable, this episode in the bigger story offers, very simply, an alarm clock Jesus, ringing a loud "wake-up call." By God's amazing grace, may we hear it, wake up if we are asleep, stay awake if we are not fully asleep yet. The call: to keep awake. To stretch out our roots below ground. To seek what deep within us wants to nourish the good seed in us. To shake off the weeds that are trying to use up all the space around us and block us from the sunshine and the rain that comes from heaven. To stand tall, spread out our whole self and thrive with what the Creator showers on us that we may thrive and grow that our wheat-ness may be used to feed and seed the world with love and goodness.

May this be so

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