

*The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds* by Bishop Lucinda Ashby July 29, 2020

When I was in high school in the mountains of northern New Mexico we had a saying: If it's green, it's good. We weren't talking about money. Northern NM, if you probably know it, is a high desert area and the soil isn't particularly good. People don't have lawns or lush gardens of any sort, and the landscape is typical of the southwest, where xeriscape gardening is the norm. It has its own unique beauty.

So anything that is green, is good. In our eyes, there was very little distinction between a good plant and a weed.

As a person who gardens now though, I've acquired a different point-of-view. I need to keep the plants that I desire healthy. I don't really like to weed, but I consider it essential to insuring that I get to eat the vegetables that I've planted.

The parable that we read today from Matthew gives advice that some would find unusual though, for in this parable Jesus tells a story of a sower who sows his field but when it starts to sprout and grow there are weeds amidst the wheat.

While common sense would tell us to go and pluck out the weeds, the sower says, no, don't - leave the weed there, so that you don't uproot the wheat by removing the weeds. And the lesson that Jesus explains later on to the disciples about the parable is that the wheat is good and desirable and at the harvest the weeds, which are bad, are to be separated and burned. Just like people, Jesus says, the good seed are the children of the kingdom and the weeds are the children of the evil one.

Yet as you and I know, Jesus doesn't normally explain his parables. So I wonder what he's getting at.

In this particular parable we have an illustration that we see less often in Jesus' teaching: one thing is positive, another thing is negative. There are a few examples like the sheep and the goats, and the good fish and the bad fish, but mostly Jesus' teaching and his parables are more oblique than this.

And this particular parable of the wheat and the weeds is unique to the Gospel of Matthew. It is not found in the other Gospels, yet it is surrounded by parables and illustrations about the Kingdom of God. The story about the sower precedes it. The pearl of great wisdom comes after it. And you probably noted that there is a gap of 6 verses

between the telling of this parable of the weeds and the wheat and the explanation that occurs in our lectionary this morning. Are you curious about what's in the middle?

They are the parables of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast.

This section of the Gospel of Matthew is filled with parables but the wheat and the weeds, which I said is unique to Matthew is especially pertinent to the time in which Jesus earliest followers were living in Antioch and Syria. The world they were experiencing was a world that was turned upside down. Wars and famine had torn apart families and relationships, while the Romans vied between themselves for power. Local authorities bet this way and that trying to accommodate the desires and caprices of the latest person in authority.

In the history of our world, whenever people have become puzzle or overwhelmed by crisis or disaster, there's a kind of thinking that becomes normative. It's not unusual to hear a group classified as "bad" and "the ones that are to blame" for this situation, and the other group that is classified as "good". Usually the ones that are speaking are in the "good" group, the sheep, the wheat, the children of light pointing fingers at the bad, who are the goats, the weeds, the children of darkness. Which tells us that the weed is in the eye of the beholder - but the language becomes polarized.

And these times in which we find ourselves are no exception. Certainly you can see it on the news where groups are attracting labels that define them as opposites from each another. Polarization has become our common language in this country, and others, creating false dichotomies and deep misunderstandings about race, and gender, and geography, and so on.

Yet in the middle, right in the middle between these polar opposites is where we often can locate truth, and the same was true for Jesus' followers. Those who heard these parables and the early Christians who read them knew that the message of polarity challenged what Jesus in fact practiced. Jesus himself didn't separate the people he knew into good people or bad people. He didn't label them as sheep or goats, or wheat or weeds. Instead he had room for outcasts and sinners whether they were called wheat or weed. They were together in the same area, at the same table, walking on the same soil. Pharisees and disciples, rich and poor, the unworthy and the worthy.

I asked a Salinas area farmer about wheat production, and he told me that from a wheat-growing perspective this parable is right on. You don't go out in the fields and pick the weeds while the wheat is growing because you don't want to lose good wheat. If you

wait, then the wheat becomes strong and the weeds can be removed without doing damage.

Wheat and weeds grow together inside of us as well. Each one of us as a person has qualities that in one circumstance may be of great value, and in another may be a hindrance. We have strengths and weaknesses that emerge at different times. We are sometimes very moral, and sometimes not so noble. Each one of us is a combination. And we work as Christians, we work to weed out our faults and our darker side.

The same thing that is happening inside of us is true between people. How many times have you been told about a conflict and been asked to take a side? Usually that involves deciding that one person is good and another is bad, and usually you know that really isn't true.

The real lesson is this: that Jesus is where the weeds meet the wheat; Jesus is where the sheep and goats intermingle, where black and white, men and women, saints and sinners, slave and free, rich and poor, and every other dichotomy we can think of come together and try to work through the complexity of relationship in order to live with mutual respect.

Where Jesus is, there is the opportunity for repentance, for reconciliation. There is a chance that we can all live with the understanding that our neighbor is also the beloved child of God, and that sometimes we are weeds and sometimes we are wheat, but most often we are a mixture, and the complexity that is growing together in the very same soil.

You're probably aware that Representative John Lewis of Georgia died this past week. He was a champion of civil rights, and he understood that racial reconciliation would happen not with polarization but with mutual respect and understanding. An ordained Baptist minister and preacher, his voice rings out with truth, and so I leave you with his words. He said,

“Hold only to love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won. Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time, don't be afraid to stand up, speak up and speak out against injustice. And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of the law, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a beloved community that is finally at peace with itself.”

Amen.