

Proper 11 Year A

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There were two big stories in the news this week about different parts of the Anglican Communion – that worldwide denomination of 80 million members of which the Episcopal Church, with its 2 million members, is the American expression.

The first story comes out of Great Britain, where the General Synod of the Church of England (the official gathering of bishops, clergy, and lay people) has approved legislation, after years of discussion on the matter, which will allow women to serve as bishops in the Church of England. While this is a monumental step for the Church of England, as a point of reference, last February we celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of Barbara Harris of Massachusetts, as the first woman elected a bishop here in the Episcopal Church... so women bishops here in the U.S. are not exactly “new news.”

The second story comes from right here in the United States. Episcopalianians in the Diocese of South Carolina find themselves deeply embroiled in an internecine battle which is sure to produce no winners, and only losers, as they are the next diocese to resort to the civil court system to determine who is truly representative of the Episcopal Church in that part of the world – and therefore entitled to all of the churches and properties and other assets.

Both of those story lines – at least as the media choose to portray them – contain individuals who are clearly entrenched on one side of the issue or the other,

as though everyone has to fall into one of two camps, as good guys and bad guys, as heroes and villains, as those who are clearly on the side of God and those who are clearly on the other side.

That simple dualism so insidious in our culture today – that every individual can be judged as being either for us or against us – lies at the heart of this morning's gospel lesson as well. For the second Sunday in a row, Jesus tells a story about farmers spreading seeds. Last week Jesus told the parable of the sower, casting seed which seemed to land all over the place... some on the pathway, some on rocky soil, some in the weeds, and some in the good soil where it could thrive and flourish. Today, Jesus puts a very different spin on the work of a farmer.

As today's story unfolds, it is a classic case of early-day eco-terrorism. A farmer plants a field of good grain. Meanwhile, his enemy sneaks in during the middle of the night, and overplants that same field with weeds, only to then escape under cover of darkness. The mischief-making adversary is a wily one, for – according to the original Greek translation of this story – he uses not just any old weed seed, but rather he plants a type of weed called darnel, which is virtually indistinguishable from the wheat as they sprout side-by-side. It is only as the two seeds grow and begin to put on their heads that the farm laborers could discover the devious and dastardly deed. And so, according to today's story, it is at that point that they come to the land owner to ask if they should try to pull out the weeds from the field. The farmer, however, realizes that the risk is too great to the good plants if his work force were to try to remove the troublesome ones. And so, he tell his workers to allow the two plants to grow together, and that the harvest will be the time to separate them.

The painful part of today's gospel for many of us is that, despite however much we may think that we are in the right, and the other person is in the wrong... however much we may wish that God would do well to just get to work and shape the world into the image that we want it to be... however much we might believe that we have the gift of deciding who is "of God" and who is "of the devil" in some kind of ultimate divine sense... however much we might wish that we were the ones in control and we should be able to tell God how to do God's job... despite all that, God's message to us is simple: "Wait... Learn to live together... Let me be the judge of who is a wheat stalk and who is a weed stalk... I'll get to the harvest when the time is right."

It is especially timely, I think, that we should hear this particular parable of Jesus right now on July 20... for two very different reasons. One reason is that this is an important week in the life of this congregation. This coming Saturday the Discernment Committee and the Vestry will be meeting in a joint retreat for the Discernment Committee to pass forward its list of three finalists for the Vestry to consider as the next rector here at All Saints. And so, it is a reminder that this interim period between permanent rectors which has been going on now for over two years is drawing ever closer to a conclusion. With the call of a new rector (whoever that person might be), there will inevitably be cries of joy, accompanied by a few cries of despair, about that decision. And God's message to us will be particularly poignant: "Wait... Learn to live together... Let me be the judge of who is a wheat stalk and who is a weed stalk."

But on a larger scale, this is an important parable for us to hear at this time, right in the middle of the summer. For the place in which we find ourselves in the

story is precisely this time of year – somewhere between the planting and the harvesting. And this is precisely where we find ourselves in God’s ultimate story as well – somewhere between the planting of the Word in the person of Jesus Christ, and God’s final harvest at the culmination of the age. You see, God’s kingdom, according to today’s story, is not something which we await. The parable makes it clear that the kingdom of God is the growing season... the kingdom of God is now.

So what does Jesus’ parable say to me? Well, it tells me that God’s realm – at least as it is lived out right at this moment – is not perfect. It tells me that we live in a world filled with wheat and weeds, with good and evil, with right and wrong. All of it is simply a part of the package. But lest anyone get the temptation to look around the world about you, and to say to yourself, “Let’s see here... wheat, wheat, weed, wheat, weed...” let me remind you of one important thing. The parable makes it clear that it is not our job to separate the wheat from the weeds. It is important to know that there is wheat in the world. And it is important to know that there are weeds in the world. And it is important to know the difference. But ultimately it is God’s responsibility, and God’s responsibility alone, to decide which is which and to put the wheat into the barn and the weeds into the fire.

One of the great advantages of living where I do down in southern California is that my house is only about five miles from the Huntington Library. The full name is really *The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens*. And if you have ever been there, you know what an incredible place it is. Besides containing literary works like a manuscript of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* over 700 years old and a copy of the Gutenberg Bible (the first major book printed with

moveable type and one of only 22 complete copies in the world), there are also works of art by the likes of Mary Cassatt, Thomas Gainsborough, and Edward Hopper.

But the treasures of the library and museums are just a foretaste of the amazing gardens. To me, at least, the Huntington Gardens are kind of like the Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens or Lotusland on steroids. In fact, I think of the Huntington Gardens as sort of a horticulturalist's version of Disneyland. They're amazing... but everything there is almost too perfect. It's gorgeous, but it's not real life. We may fantasize about living in a lovely garden like that, but the simple fact of the matter is that we don't – we can't – that according to our own biblical tradition we left that garden – we were, in fact, expelled from that garden – many, many years ago. We can visit a world without weeds, but at the end of the day, we always have to go back home to the real world once again.

I spoke a few minutes ago of church news emanating from England and South Carolina. Of course, that is not the only thing going on the world right at the moment. For those of you who are keeping score, the tally (at least as of yesterday) stood at 310 to 2. That is the official number of fatalities as a result of the latest incursion (that's the official term being used, rather than "invasion") by Israeli forces into the Palestinian territories... 310 dead Palestinians, and 2 dead Israelis. Amidst the carnage and senseless slaughter of so many innocent victims, there was a most surprising encounter earlier this week on the outskirts of one of the Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories.

For Muslims, this is the holy month of Ramadan (the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic calendar), when the faithful fast during the daylight hours, as one of the

five basic tenets of Islam. For Jews the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the Jewish month, Tammuz, also fell this past week. Observant Jews fast on that date, to commemorate the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 69 A.D. So it was, last Tuesday, that both the Muslims and the Jews spent the day fasting, following their own particular religious customs. As the sun set, a few courageous souls broke their fast in a most dramatic way. Meeting in the middle of a road lined by fig trees on either side, a group of Jews and a group of Muslims set up tables and laid out an evening meal, and ate together as a sign of solidarity. Both sides could have claimed with an absolute certainty which group was the wheat, and which group was the weeds. But instead, they chose a different path... to “Wait... To learn to live together... and to let God be the judge of who was the wheat and who was the weeds.”

Once we lived in a garden. Now we live in a field. It is a field, though, which – wheat and weeds together – is God’s kingdom alive and at work in our very midst. When we pray in a few minutes, “Thy kingdom come,” we are not praying for something afar off, as much as we are praying for God to open our eyes and open our hearts to that which is already all around us. May you find your place in that field. And then, at the final harvest, may you offer your wheat – and offer your weeds – as you are welcomed home... and the field will once again become a garden.

Amen.