

July 23, 2017/16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Genesis 28:1-12, 23-24; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43;
Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Field of Dreams or Field of Weeds?"

On the parsonage property is a garden we have come to call the "Gratitude Garden." It was tilled by Daisy and Angus Beal, and planted by, well it was supposed to be the Sunday School students, but that didn't work out. So Beth and Roger Haynes did the bulk of the planting. Kenneth Kemp and his helpers have also done some planting and Brenda Warman and little Aries have been out there working as well. And I planted a few rows at the back end of the garden for Kate and I.

Beth is by far the expert gardener. She laid down landscaping fabric over many of the rows and cut it in places to let the plants grow through. On other rows she put down a bed of straw, through which the garden plants could grow. Both of these are ways to keep the weeds from growing up and around the garden plants.

And it has worked! She has been out there, picking some weeds these past few days, but really, there haven't been too many weeds for her to pick (don't tell her I said that though!). On the other hand, I did not put down any fabric. I did not put down any straw. And now my part of the garden looks perhaps a lot like the field that Jesus was telling about in his parable. What I basically have is a field of grass! Actually, I have a field of crabgrass, pigweed, quackgrass, buckhorn plantain, lambs quarters and dandelions, just to name a few! They are all very hearty!

In Jesus' parable, we have a land owner who does things a bit out of the ordinary. To those who were listening, and who labored in the fields, as many of them very well were peasant farmers, Jesus' story likely caught their attention and perhaps raised a few eyebrows.

Jesus tells of this man, the master of the property, who, instead of ordering his slaves, goes out and plants his own field. He plants *"good seed"* in his field. However, as the plants come up, his servants realize that there are weeds growing up among the wheat. Of course, this is very common, weeds always find a way of getting into fields. But in the story, the weeds are seen as the work of an enemy. The servants want to go in and pull the weeds, which is what normally would have been done. But the owner tells them, *"No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"*

The unusual practices of the owner in the parable clearly tell Jesus' listeners that this is not about farming. This is a story about the kingdom of God, or as Matthew likes to refer to it, the "kingdom of heaven." It is a story about humanity under God's unfathomable patience. As no sane farmer would do, the landowner in the parable seems quite satisfied with allowing the weeds to grow up with the wheat. Thus, God has *patience* with us, even though we may appear to behave as plantings of the evil one. God allows both good and evil to dwell together. And it is not for us to separate out one part from the other. And though it is a parable of grace, it is also a parable about judgment, as the weeds are burned at the harvest. But we might surmise from the story, that it is indeed God's hope that in some miraculous fashion, the weeds may eventually become wheat!

On the other hand, the *interpretation* of the parable is much more judgmental! Here Jesus tells his disciples that the good seed represents those who follow him, they are the seeds that he sows. The weeds are those who do evil and have been sown by the devil himself! At the day of judgment, the tares, those who are evil, will be gathered up and thrown into the furnace of fire, where they will weep and gnash their teeth. This is a much more polarized vision of the world, where some are good and some are evil, and yes, good and evil must exist together, but it is clear that the good should seek to separate themselves from the evil ones. It is an "Us vs. Them" picture of the world that is painted here.

Now scholars tell us that certainly the *interpretation* of the parable as written in Matthew could have indeed been Jesus' words. But it is more likely that they were the words of Matthew or a later redactor. They certainly could be reflecting the state of the early church at the time of Matthew's writing. A church in its infancy that was struggling with members who were not all totally committed to following the ways of Christ. As Jesus says clearly, earlier in Matthew's gospel, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.*" (7:21) There was certainly a concern on Matthew's part, that the faith community needed to purify itself from evil influences. And it is interesting that in the *allegorical interpretation* that we have here, there is no mention of the householder's patience, of the grace of God for all God's people.

An interesting little note is that the type of weed possibly referred to here, is called "Bearded Darnel", a type of Rye plant native to the seacoast regions of Syria. It is a plant that looks very much like wheat, until the seeds come forth. It is a noxious, poisonous plant that contains ergot fungus, which can be deadly. You can understand then, the seriousness of sorting such grain from the wheat that would be used for food. Matthew's concern for the purity and faithfulness of the young Christian community, is just as serious.

So what does this say to us about the church today? Are we to separate ourselves from those who are evil? Do we have the ability to look at others and know if they are good or bad, wheat or darnel? Does the gospel demand that we purify ourselves of those who might be an evil influence? Certainly Jesus judged the Pharisees and other religious leaders of his day, calling them "snakes and vipers" and condemned those who cloaked themselves with the garb of religion but did nothing to help their neighbors. And indeed the history of the Christian Church is full of examples of separating the pure out from the sinful world, judging and even executing those determined guilty of some sin or another. But is that what this parable is telling us to do?

Perhaps there is another way to understand this parable. We certainly know that people are not just *all* good or *all* bad, that we each know within ourselves good and bad thoughts and motivations, and are capable of good and bad actions or behaviors. Maybe the parable can also be a way for us to look at ourselves? That we need to be aware of the potential for evil in our own hearts, and to strive for, be intentional about living out the good that is there.

In the Genesis story, Jacob has a dream. He dreams about a ladder that reaches to heaven, and angels ascend and descend upon the ladder. In the dream he receives a blessing, a continuance of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. And when he awakes, Jacob calls the place, Bethel, the "House of God." At Bethel, Jacob received a *vision* that allowed him to move forward.

At House Church last week we talked about liminal or thin places, places like Jacob experienced at Bethel, where the spiritual and the mundane worlds seem to mix, places where we seem to be able to have a glimpse of, an encounter with the holy, with God. And those experiences can provide us with a confidence, an assurance of faith, that can sustain us and comfort us in times of difficulty, times of trial, of danger, of uncertainty. They can also give us hope, and a vision of what could be. To illustrate this at House Church, Cathie shared a story with us.

In 1958, a Catholic monk named Thomas Merton, was standing at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville, Kentucky, in the center of the shopping district, when he had an experience, an epiphany you might call it. He had been struggling with the life he had chosen as a monk, a life cloistered within the monastery, separated from the rest of humanity. He would later write about it, *"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness... Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time."*

Merton's experience, his epiphany, is something we can learn from. In a world so rampant with division and polarization, perhaps the church can be a thin place where all may obtain a glimpse of the holy, where we all can exist together, where we can find acceptance and can share a vision of moving forward together.

We humans, none of us, are totally good, or totally bad, but a complex mixture of both. Yet, if we could look at one another as Merton realized we could, to see in each person, *"the secret beauty of their hearts ... the person that each one is in God's eyes"*, then perhaps we could begin to help one another turn from being weeds to wheat, from a world of hate and isolation, selfishness and greed, to become the people God intends us to be, plantings of love and compassion, filled with the grace of an amazing, hopeful, and patient, God. Amen.