

“Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water”

This weeks Gospel lesson may sound similar to last weeks, but with a new twist. The metaphor of planting and yielding for the kingdom of God helps us to see that our lives are always growing and being nurtured for Gods work. The soil of last week's lessons is the base or foundation from which we grow. I think the soil is the community of believers or congregation. In community with one another we are not solely individuals, rather a group of people bound together by God's love. In today's gospel we are the seeds; the individual persons planted in this place to become the product that springs forth to be present in the world. As seed, our roots are firmly planted in the good soil with other people. Together we are nourished in faith by our participation in ministry. Our faith is enhanced through our worship, bible study, Christian education, caring for others, by using our God given gifts for the world. Our nourishment is continually enriched by not only God's love for us but also through those who surround us in our daily lives.

Until recently, I planted a garden in my back yard. In fact, my family always had a vegetable garden. It was economical for our growing family to have vegetables readily available. We didn't plant wheat, but we usually had staples like beans, onions, tomatoes and corn, with the occasional lettuce, cucumbers or melons for variety. I look back and think the real reason for a garden was to keep me and my brothers occupied during the summer. There were always weeds to pull and stones to gather. It didn't matter how many weeds were pulled, it seemed they were there again the next day. It was a never ending task.

Matthew writes of the farmer who sowed his seeds then noticed that weeds appeared as the wheat was maturing. Surely an enemy did this. I planted good seed. Notice how the responsibility for the weeds appearance is placed on someone else. The farmer quickly points his finger at someone else. It must have been someone who is against me. No way would I plant weeds to grow among the wheat. I have no use for the weeds. The farm hands believe if we pull the weeds out the wheat which is now ready for harvest will be easier to gather. Let us remove the weeds that are in the way. But the farmer understands if the ground is broken by pulling the weeds, it will weaken the wheat. To weaken the wheat may cause it to dry up, wither and die.

What is the significance of the wheat and the weeds in this parable? Wheat is a grain that provided food for people not only in Biblical times but also today. Wheat is actually considered a grass and can be cultivated in most temperate climates. It grows just about anywhere where there is soil, sun and rain. Think of the foods that use wheat as a primary ingredient – cereal, pasta, baked goods, flour, cookies. A friend of mine who was a floral designer used to include a bunch of wheat in each of his floral arrangements. He told me wheat is the source of life. Then

he reminded me that in the sacrament of Holy Communion we receive the body of Christ in the bread made from wheat; the beginning of life.

What about those weeds, or in some translations tares? Merriam-Webster defines weeds as, “a plant not valued where it is growing and is usually vigorous in growth; one that tends to overgrow or choke out a more desirable plant; an obnoxious growth, thing or person, something detrimental in quality.” The weed in this text is likely called ‘darnel’. It is a weed, something not desired in fields but it looks exactly like the wheat grain, until it matures. The stalk and head of grain are so similar you don’t know the difference until it is full grown. The darnel has far smaller seeds than wheat, and it is claimed that these seeds, when ground into flour, are poisonous, due perhaps to a particular fungus which develops in the seed itself.

This parable shows us how as people of God, we are surrounded by people of the devil. Those who want to sow weeds among the good people. The good and the bad live together. And if the ‘bad’ is removed, it disrupts the good too. Just like weeding a garden, you have to be careful to not disturb the flowers or vegetable plants. Otherwise, the good may wither and die. Seems like a huge paradox to me. On one hand you have the good and on the other you have the bad. It is like you can’t have one without the other.

As Jesus explains this parable to the disciples, they realize that it is not a concern of this world. Instead, at the end of the age when the final harvest is gathered, then the weeds will be separated from the wheat. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

What does this parable say to the people of God in the twenty-first century? A world very different and yet similar to ancient times. We live in a world where good is constantly being challenged with bad. I like to think that everything we do is for good. We may not agree as one, but deep down all we desire is to do good. What is bad anyway? What does it mean when we say something is bad? Is it that what has been done or said is opposite of your own thinking? Or is it bad when a group of people agree with one decision while others are opposed?

Growing up I learned that if I can’t do something good for someone else, then, I wouldn’t do it. My mantra is to help someone else in whatever way I am able, to be aware of others. I look back and see there were times in my life that I was definitely a seed of wheat. Those were times when I helped someone through a difficult time, or assisted with making a situation that seemed out of control bearable, or when I helped to organize a local food bank. The seeds that were planted and nourished within me were not only from my parents and those around me, but by God who knew from the very beginning the path I would follow.

Then there were times when I was a weed. And I am not talking about the time when I

was eleven and my mother said I was growing like a weed! Yes, I was a gangly looking teenager trying to grow into a body that did not seem to cooperate at the time. Rather, there were times, and still are times when I do or say things that seem to go against other peoples thinking. I imagine you can think of some examples for yourself. For example, I have friends who when I told them I was going to seminary they looked at me like I had two heads! We KNOW you! My response was yes, and that is why God is calling me to ministry! There are also countless times when I responded to another persons concern with a bit of an attitude. Like, don't bother me. Or what about the times when you hit the send button on an email, and wish you hadn't.

Our lives are constantly faced with good and bad, with the wheat that gives life and the weeds that seem to get out of control and smother out the good. What would happen if the weeds in our life were taken away? Before there was running water in homes, the family would bathe using a large tub or basin. Because water was considered a luxury often times families would bathe only once a week – Saturday night so you would be clean for worship on Sunday morning. To conserve water, the family would use the same water. The father or head of the household used the water first; followed by the mother then the children in descending order of age. By the time the baby was bathed, you couldn't tell if the baby was in the water or not. It had become discolored and dingy looking that you needed to check the water before throwing it out to make sure the baby was removed first. The good water that was clean had become bad, discolored to the point that its usefulness was in question.

Even in congregations, there are times when things go well and times when things go not as well. Wherever people gather, at work, around the dinner table, in a blog conversation - there will always be some form of disagreement. At church it might be how people dress for worship, or how a program is run, or an issue the pastor brings up in sermons you know, 'he is always talking about money', or maybe the distractions that might occur with younger children in attendance. I could name hundreds of things that someone might think are bad.

The reality is we come to worship to give thanks and praise to God for all God has and continues to give us each day; the wheat of life, and the weeds of discomfort that challenge life. Jesus came to earth to show us the way; to teach us to love one another as God loves us – even in all of our sinful ways. I challenge you to look at yourself. From the outside, all of us look very similar. A stranger will look and not know if you are wheat or a darnel (the weed that looks like wheat) until maturity, God knows and loves you all the same. As we grow in our faith together, may we learn to live together as wheat among the weeds. Go out into the world as wheat, to give life and hope in a world that longs for goodness. Paul wrote, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." All the world is God's own field, fruit unto his praise to yield; wheat and tares together sown, unto joy or sorrow grown. For the Lord our God shall come and shall take his harvest home; from his field shall in that day all offenses purge away; give his angels charge at last in the fire the tares to cast, but the fruitful ears to store in his garner evermore. Amen.

