Sermon: “Wheat and Weeds: Let them grow together.”

Place: Washington National Cathedral

July 17, 2011

Lessons:

Genesis 28:10-19a

Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Today’s Gospel parable is dear and familiar to farmers and gardeners. Farmers contend daily with weeds in their wheat fields. Most gardeners can imagine an “enemy” with a bucket of weeds—distributing the curse and pacing the garden like a thief in the night. Now I am not a real gardener like my wife is, but I know that gardens must be tended—or else. You cannot just dead-head and trim. You must also plant and replant. For sure you must weed and deal with the tares which you did not plant or plan for.

Gardens may be our most creative effort to control nature, to landscape nature according to our design. But controlling nature is an uneasy truce with the powers that be. Gardens can go to weed in short order. It is almost inevitable: weeds mingle with the wheat and that’s the way it is. Gardens are hospitable to both the plant chosen by us and the plant that chooses us.

Originally, Jesus did not tell this parable as a horticultural insight. The writer of Matthew’s Gospel was not really concerned with wheat fields and gardens. The Gospel we hear today was written most likely for residents in an urban center, a city that had a very large Jewish population. It was also a city which had one of the earliest Christian Gentile missions. The writer is sympathetic to these contrasting communities. Our parable repeats some of the themes in Matthew: “Sowing, seeds, soil, kingdom, obstacles to growth and the...evil one.” Indeed, Matthew’s Gospel is concerned about the problem of evil in the world. Did this Gospel parable of the wheat and weeds appear in our holy scriptures because there was opposition to the gospel by the Jewish population which was the context of this very early Christian mission, possibly in Antioch or in Syria? Or, was the early Christian Gentile community concerned about “the character of some of its own members?” Both of these questions have been framed by W. D. Davies, the late George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament at Duke University.

It is true the problem of evil goes with the failure of the gospel to win the hearts of all. Matthew, however, is concerned about the evil one behind the problem of evil: “the devil must share the responsibility for the apparent failure of God’s word.” God’s sowing is complicated by Satanic opposition. Wolves are “in the midst of the sheep...so too are there weeds in the midst of wheat.” The source of evil is as troublesome as the problem of evil.
The most problematic part of today’s gospel story is the phrase: “the field is the world.” Davies is right: “much exegetical blood has been spilled over these words.” Is this a parable about “church discipline?” Is it about ridding the Church of sinners? In fighting the Donatists, St. Augustine interpreted the text in just this fashion. Let’s face it: we will never know this side of Jordan what Jesus really meant in this parable. Suffice it to say: our parable today makes it plain that the victory of God’s kingdom is sure. What we must worry about is getting from here to there!

It is true: most of us do not live with the end of the age on our minds daily. Most of us do not equate tares or weeds with the problem of evil. Not many of us think of the “enemy” as the source for weeds. How many of us believe that the devil prowls planet earth and opposes the divine plan?

When interpreting the parable, do we believe that the evil doers or the weeds will be thrown into the “furnace of fire?” Do we agree that for the evil doers there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as the righteous “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father?” I hope we could all agree about two things: human failure is part of this story, and we know that evil or weeds or that which is bad only exists for a season. The wheat will finally be gathered in the great harvest of history. The weeds will be pulled out as part of this great harvest.

But let’s face it: we are not at the great harvest, at history’s end. We are living here and how—between this parable and the end of the age. How do we get from now to then, from here to there?

We live in an age of wheat and weeds. How do we accommodate such difference, such polarities? Such contradictions? Such contrary realities? We could conclude that God dispenses arbitrary judgment. In the Terrence Malick’s “The Tree of Life,” Brad Pitts’ character in this new movie believes in a “fearsome, unpredictable Old Testament God—the God of Job.” Such a God would have no problem plucking weeds or evil ones and sending them to the “furnace of fire.” But is there another way to think about wheat and weeds in this time before God shows God’s hand for the last time?

There is a Jesuit poet who invites us to live in life’s garden with contradictions, and so he writes a “Litany of Contradictory Things.” Hear him:

“Wheat and weeds: let them grow together.

Arabs and Jews in Palestine: let them grow together.

Documented and undocumented aliens: let them grow together.

Immigrants and Native Americans: let them grow together.

Blacks and whites of South Africa: let them grow together.

Sikhs and Hindus of India: let them grow together.

Rich and poor, humble and haughty: let them grow together.

Those whose thinking is similar and contrary: let them grow together.
Winter, spring, summer, fall; let them grow together.
All seasons of one’s life: let them grow together.
Joys and sorrow, laughter, tears: let them grow together.
Virtue and vice: let them grow together
Wisdom of the East and West: let them grow together.
All contrarieties of the Lord: let them grow together."
You may be like me: adding verses to this poet’s litany:
Muslims and Christians: let them grow together.
Gays and straights: let them grow together.
Liberals and conservatives: let them grow together.
Republicans and Democrats: let them grow together.
Able and handicapped: let them grow together.

This litany is a bold series of petitions which begs us to live patiently with the complexity that is ours in the valley of vision where we find ourselves. The litany points us away from our differences to the way we will live together. It is not either/or; rather it is both/and. Should we not also consider the inadequacy of all the labels we keep using to name our contradictions?

About ten years ago, my daughter, Ellen, was working in a day care center. Ellen is mentally challenged but does not miss much. She was approached by a conniving parent who asked her: Ellen--is the day care center diverse? I watched this encounter. Ellen was at first perplexed by the question. Finally, she offered: well, there is one little girl who wears plaid. Now that's a new category! One little girl wears plaid. Real difference. Actual diversity.

Is it time for the Church to step up to the plate with such freshness, such new ways of looking at life’s garden with its wheat and weeds? I am weary of the old saws, the old terms, the old polarities. I do like plaid being one of the contrary or contradictory things.

The Church of England, meeting in York, has just completed its General Synod. There was a lot of conversation about the demographic challenges facing Anglicans in England. One priest asked: will the church be around in 20 years? The average age is 61 in aging congregations. Old and young: let them grow together?

The Archbishop of Canterbury cautioned against staring too much into the abyss. He asked his fellow Christians to consider church growth not church burial. A journalist wrote: “The AB spoke feelingly about his recent visit to Congo, where he had heard victims and perpetrators of violence who had been
rescued by the Church there.” The AB said: “And I thought, listening to them, ‘If it wasn’t for the Church, no one, absolutely no one, would have cared, and they would be lost still.’ Yes, the Church matters in Congo, and it matters here. The Church matters in this time between today’s parable and the last great harvest. Let us not play God in our time. Let us not dispense judgment readily. Might we live in life’s garden with some ambiguity, with some contradictions, some contrary things? Might the Church lead the way in such generous, thoughtful living? Might the Church teach us about following Jesus, not playing God?

Until the Son of Man comes with the angels, we will live with wheat and weeds, good and evil. Be careful with the labels you select and the names you call people. In life’s garden, we all walk clumsily through a valley of vision. Harvest time belongs to God alone. For now, let us appreciate those who wear plaid and grow with those with whom we differ. To the God of us all, let us be thankful.

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