

July 23, 2017
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11A
The Rev. Dr. Lynda Tyson
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23
Romans 8: 12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th c. American essayist, once wrote, “[a weed is] a plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered.”ⁱ Similarly, I used to have a gardening tutorial video by a gentle, grandmotherly British Master Gardener who said, “A weed is merely a plant growing in a place where we would rather it not grow.”

When we lived in Downeast Maine, my husband Charlie and I knew some herbalists, Rosanna and Nancy, who converted a beautiful rolling meadow into an even more beautiful organic farm. The first time I visited their farm, I was surprised to see they had left in place the indigenous plants (what I would have called “weeds”). Instead of tilling the entire field before planting, they left the weeds as they were, and they used a small cultivator to turn over only narrow furrows for their seeds. The rows of weeds between furrows, they explained, held moisture in the soil, prevented erosion, and helped attract beneficial insects. Who knew?! Looking back, it seems Rosanna and Nancy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and my video Master Gardner tutor were not dealing with the same sort of weeds intended in this morning’s parable.

Instead of the word “weeds,” the old King James translation uses the Middle English word *tares*—something objectionable or intolerable. The common name for *tares* is *bearded darnel*. It grows in the same production zones as wheat, and when the two plants are young they are virtually identical to one another. *Bearded darnel* distinguishes itself from wheat underground, with its aggressive roots that surround neighboring plants, sucking up nutrients and water, and making it impossible to dig out without damaging the good crop.ⁱⁱ Above ground, one can only begin to tell the wheat from the tares as they both mature. When the wheat ears form, their weight causes the stalk to bend. We’ve all seen images of waves of golden wheat fields swaying in the wind. *Bearded darnel* blades, on the other hand, are rigid, straight, and lacking wheat’s golden color. If consumed, the bearded darnel seed is known to cause hallucination, and even death. Ancient farmers knew it would be a lethal mistake to harvest and grind wheat and *bearded darnel* together into flour.

The householder’s slaves in the parable are concerned—they notice the problem when the crops begin to mature and they are anxious to remove the weeds. But, however undesirable the weeds, the householder instructs his servants to leave the weeds among the wheat for now. Best to wait. Attempting to separate them before harvest time would mean the potential destruction of both wheat and weed. Let them both mature, grow alongside one another. Give them a chance to be what they will be—some of the plants will bear useful fruit and others will not. And besides, it’s not the servants’ role, it’s not their place to judge or to gather up and destroy the weeds. The responsibility for that final decision belongs to the Master on the last day, at harvest time. “I will tell the reapers,” the householder says, which will be stored and which will be burned.

The Parable of the Tares is one of three parables of final judgment in Matthew, none of which appears in Mark, Luke, or John. As to the question whether or not these three parables can really be attributed to Jesus modern scholarship favors authorship by the evangelist Matthew himself, perhaps in response to what may have been going on in Matthew’s emerging community of late 1 c. Christian converts.ⁱⁱⁱ The Jesus-followers in Matthew’s community were faced with the decision whether or not to leave the synagogue and wondering what kind of persecution might await them. It was a time of bitter division, with fear and suspicion directed at one another within the community arising from prejudice about who should be “in” and who should be not be welcome in their emerging church. Who were wheat, and who were weeds?

This parable paints the worst possible impression of the weeds in the field, starting with their having been planted by “the enemy.” Matthew invites the hearers of this parable (then and even now) to want these menacing weeds to be gathered up and burned. As presented, these are not just innocent plants growing where we would prefer them not to be. These are not Ralph Waldo Emerson weeds whose virtues have yet to be discovered. As the story goes, these weeds have no virtues, in fact—they are dangerous! But are they—dangerous—these weeds? They are not so dangerous that the wheat cannot grow up among them. The householder may be disappointed at the surprise of the weeds, but, seeming far from anxious, he says the weeds can be dealt with by the reapers at harvest time. I wonder if the slaves in the parable are over-reacting to the weeds. I wonder if members of Matthew’s community are over-reacting in their fear-filled inhospitable attitudes toward some of the would-be Jesus followers in their midst.

Parables, by design, can send mixed messages—even while today’s parable, on the surface, seems to caution against intermingling of good and bad seed, all three of Matthew’s final judgment parables illustrate and reinforce the *inclusivity* Jesus models in his own life. Here, the wheat and the weeds are sown together in the same field. They are encouraged to grow alongside one another to maturity—maturity of faith, perhaps. Matthew’s community members may well be of different backgrounds (Jews, now Jewish Christians, and maybe even some Greeks). And, once they are planted together in the field (a metaphor for the world) their roots are mingled. What matters is not their roots—as in their respective backgrounds—what matters more is the eventual fruit they will bear in the world. Meanwhile, it is not their place to discriminate within their ranks, to guess who is wheat and weed—prejudice does not belong in this community of followers—Jesus welcomes all who would follow him. Only God will decide worthiness to enter the ultimate kingdom, and not today—only at the end of the age.

I wonder what to make of this parable, listening with our 21st c. ears. We say, “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” (BCP, 358) Doesn’t God make all the seeds? That would be Ralph Waldo Emerson’s question.

Besides pointing to Jesus’ inclusivity, the parable also calls attention to our human tendency to paint the worst possible image of those we fear and those we consider our adversaries—those of different roots who look and think differently from ourselves and who might move into our fields and partake of the water and nutrients in our soils, so (God forbid) we might have less. And, oh dear, what if their seed would intermingle with our seed?! It is a human fear that existed before the likes of Jacob and his ancestors. Oh, that our identity as a nation would be compromised, oh that our ritual purity would be defiled by contact, with outsiders.

Let’s do a little truth-telling here, neither Jacob nor his ancestors were without blemish, and yet Jacob is chosen by God to father the twelve sons who would sire the twelve tribes that would be the seeds—the imperfect seeds of a blessed (and imperfect) people...beloved of God.

Perhaps you have heard or seen Ray Suarez on National Public Radio or various TV news programs. Last April, he gave a talk to Yale Divinity School students. Ray Suarez is a church-choir-singing, Sunday School-teaching Episcopalian who calls himself a Christian, Patriot, (former Chicagoan, now) Northeasterner, Latino reporter who (as he says) is suspect because he claims all of those diverse markers that don’t seem to go together in today’s divisive climate.^{iv} Ray Suarez spoke of having grown up in Brooklyn in the 1960’s and ‘70’s in a comfortable melting-pot neighborhood where, “Passover days were part of the heartbeat of the neighborhood...[while] other kids were dragged to department stores for their Easter clothes.”^v Things are different now. Suarez says he feels he no longer lives in the country in which he was raised.^{vi} “These are strange days,” he says.^{vii}

“The stereotyping is nonstop. The allegations are often laughable. But the visions of America from the two poles are mutually exclusive, and—at first glance—irreconcilable.”^{viii} “We Americans do not go into battle crediting the other side of the argument with operating out of good will. Increasingly your opponent is not merely wrong, or mistaken, but *bad*,” he says (emphasis, mine).^{ix}

Figuring out what to do with that—how to be together as wheat and weeds in this country and in the world is not a new problem, but it seems to have reached a new modern high. Our faith calls us to live alongside one another and to leave the ultimate judgment of others, and whatever ultimate gathering and burning, to God. As long as we continue to play the role of judge and jury over those with whom we differ, and as long as they continue to reciprocate, how will we ever realize Christ’s promise of inclusivity, reconciliation, restoration to God, and the emergence of God’s kingdom in the here and now?

Even though there is plenty of evidence of evil in the world both in Matthew’s day and today, I don’t think I am alone in my discomfort with ancient biblical images of God’s end-time-wrath in the form of fiery furnaces accompanied by great weeping and gnashing of teeth. I don’t know about you, but I come down on the side of the parable’s householder, who says all of us who have been planted out here in the field, along with those tending the crops, need only to grow and to let grow, leaving the big cosmic evil business (at the end of time) to God. In the meantime, we are called to grow side-by-side with our neighbors in the field, intermingled wheat and weeds together, working (without judgment) to bear our best fruit, to usher in Christ’s promised kingdom, sooner than later, here and now.

ⁱ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fortune of the Republic” (1878), reprinted in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Miscellanies* (London: Adamant Media Corp., 2006), 396.

-
- ⁱⁱ David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting On the Word*, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 260.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, pbk. ed., (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), chapter vi.
- ^{iv} Ray Suarez, *The Holy Vote: The Politics of Faith in America* (New York, NY: Harper, 2007), 3.
- ^v *Ibid.*
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 2.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, 3.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, 7.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*