

Let 'em Grow

Proper 11, Year A – Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

preached at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 20, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Here we go again. Just like last week, in this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus trots out another parable about farming. And just like last week, something about it just doesn't quite add up. No sooner does Jesus finish with the parable of the sower than he picks right back up with what has always been called the parable of the "wheat and the tares." ("Tares" is King James language for weeds.) He tells the story of a farmer that sows a really good crop of wheat, until someone comes along and plants weed seed along with the wheat. When the wheat comes up, there's the weeds right along with them. But instead of having his servants pull up the weeds, the farmer lets them grow until harvest time and then lets the *reapers* sort the weeds from the wheat. I've got to tell you, once again that doesn't sound like any farmers I have ever known.

How many of you have gardens? How many of you gardeners just let weeds grow up with the peonies and the columbine and the roses – or with the peppers and the zucchini and the tomatoes? No way! All y'all gardeners join me: *No way!*

And it's no different for those among us who do their gardening on a larger, production, put-the-food-on-the-table scale. Even with the new no-till techniques and all the other innovations in modern farming, farmers like Bill still spend a preponderance of their time and energy and resources trying to keep weeds from growing up among the crops. Let 'em grow? *No way!* Long before the seed is planted, the field is carefully prepared and cultivated to ensure that weeds have no foothold in the first place. When planting time comes, the farmer goes out and buys the latest seed, engineered to cooperate in weed eradication. As the grain sprouts and grows, the new crop is sprayed and cultivated and sprayed again to keep the weeds from ever getting an upper hand. This afternoon, if you drive either way out 60 or down the Audubon, you'll see rows and rows of corn and beans, but I *challenge* you to find a weed. And the stray plants you *do* see sticking up among the crops are all brown and shriveled, the victims of the farmer's vigilant care. Let 'em grow? *No way!*

Now, I suppose some might say that ancient farmers did things differently and that this "let 'em grow" method of weed control was how it had to be done back then. But think about it, much of what would eventually be harvested by a landholder as big as the farmer in Jesus's story would be sold to others as feed or as food or as seed. As the prospective buyers walked along Palestine Route 60 (or whatever) and saw all the weeds sticking up in this farmer's field, that buyer would *run*, not walk, to make a contract with some *other* grower. Let the weeds grow, take care of them at harvest time, and in the mean-time lose customers? *No way!*

Furthermore, at least some of the harvest was destined for bread on the tables of the farmer's own household. Do you have any idea what bread would taste like made with flour that included *weed* seed? I don't particularly *want* to know! The servants that are in a hurry to pull up those weeds would be eating that bread. The farmer's *wife* would be eating that bread. The farmer's *children* would be eating that bread. Let the weeds grow, take care of them at harvest time, and let the kiddies eat *weed* bread? *No way!*

Nowadays, farmers generally order seed that has been specially selected and prepared for planting their next crop. But back in Jesus' time some of this year's crop became next year's seed. Whatever got into the storage bins this fall is what got planted next spring. An enemy may have planted *this* year's crop of weeds, but that's no reason to raise a fresh crop of weeds *next* season. Let the weeds grow and take care of them at harvest time, and plant your own, bigger problems next season? *No way!*

Jesus is talking to a bunch of people who may have been fishers or merchants or even tax collectors. But in their day-to-day life, they knew enough about how farming worked to know that a decent harvest depended upon a great many things, including effective weed management. The servants in Jesus's story knew the right thing, the smart thing, the *responsible* thing to do. "Do you want us to go and gather those weeds?" they ask the farmer. But the farmer in Jesus' story, *this* farmer surprises them – and tells them to let things go until the harvest. Jesus's listeners probably did a double-take. "Did we hear him right?" "Let 'em grow and we'll sort it out at harvest time?" "*No way!*"

So here we are again. Just like the sower in last week's story. This is no *ordinary* farmer. *This* farmer is up to something.

For centuries this story has been called “the parable of the wheat and the tares.” Sunday school teachers have taught, and singers have sung, and preachers have preached, and seminary professors have... professed about how each Christian must so pattern his or her life so that, come harvest time, we will be assured that we will be among the wheat that is gathered in – rather than the weeds that are burned in the fire.

And when we’re not trying to figure out whether *we* are wheat or tares, we are trying to figure out which one describes our spouse or our children or our obnoxious cousin, Fred. We spend an *awful* lot of time trying to figure out whether the fella or gal that we work with or play with is a weed or a seed. We spend *way* too much time trying to figure out if the person sitting in the pew next to us, or in the church down the road, is heading for the grain bins or to the burn heap. And, of course, we spend nearly *all* our time making sure we avoid contact with any of those weedy types, lest we should get mixed up with *them* somehow.

There’s an old joke that you’ve heard me tell a longer version of before, about Saint Peter taking a batch of new arrivals on a tour of heaven. At one point he asks the group to be quiet as they pass several large gatherings, each separated by a cloudbank. When Pete finally offered to take questions, one of the newcomers holds up a hand. “Who were those groups,” he asked, “and why did we have to be quiet?” “Oh, we don’t like to trouble them.” Peter replied. “Those were all churches that think they’re the only ones up here.” We can be pretty judgmental for just another stalk of weed – uh, I mean, wheat.

But Jesus’s story isn’t about the weeds. His story isn’t about the wheat. The story, as usual, is about that farmer who’s *up* to something. The story, as usual, is about the farmer that planted the first garden. It’s about the farmer who tended that first pair of weeds. It’s about the farmer who has been carefully, prayerfully, sometimes *tearfully* tending the garden since the dawn of creation, the farmer who will one day call for the harvest. While we are looking around and wondering why the one next to us isn’t being appropriately “wheaty,” it may turn out that that farmer is growing barley – or corn – or *milo* even. Maybe the farmer is growing all those in the same, mixed up field. Maybe the farmer doesn’t need *my* help discerning the weeds from the seeds. And as crazy and reckless as it may seem, maybe God even has use for us crabgrasses and us ragweeds as well.

Of course, that’s the same kind of farming as the sower, isn’t it? It’s confusing. It’s careless. It’s nuts! But do you want to bet the farm on any other farmer? *No way!* Because this farmer is gracious. And he’s merciful. And he’s loving. And he’s the only way that *any* of us would have any chance of receiving the wonderful gifts of the harvest.

Thanks be to God for the confusing, abundant, careless mercy of God’s amazing love for a seedy, needy, weedy sinner like me.