

Pentecost 6, Proper 11
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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Problem in the Text

While on vacation two weeks ago I was standing in Denmark with an old friend from my time in Tanzania as a missionary. He is a Lutheran pastor with a parish on the southwest coast near the German border. It is a flat, cold, and windblown part of the world. We had paused on an after-dinner walk on one of their long summer days. His parish is in a rural village, surrounded by farms. We were looking out over a field of wheat that was still green; the harvest wouldn't come for another month or even two that far north. I had remarked at the beauty of the field, with all of the wildflowers growing up alongside the wheat. My friend was told me how the Danes use organic principles, so they let the flowers and the weeds grow with their crops and that they sort it out later, valuing the quality of their organic wheat over the volume possible if they sprayed chemicals for weeds. As we spoke the Gospel reading for today came up. I knew that this reading was the lectionary assigned for my next sermon. I mentioned how I had noticed in Tanzania, the goats and sheep look alike except that the goats' tails point up and sheep's down. That lends a different understanding among Tanzanians of the Gospel story of the goats being separated from the sheep on Judgment day. Where we in the Europe and America imagine a scene where it is a clear-cut sorting, it is a more subtle undertaking in Tanzania. I said to Robert, now Denmark shows me beautiful wildflowers and weeds growing among the wheat. Again, the parable shifted from what I thought would be clear-cut. This is a tough Gospel passage Matthew presents us with this morning. Those who gathered around Jesus wanted to know what the Kingdom of Heaven was like and Jesus gave them parables. Jesus told them the Kingdom is like "someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away." So, even the Kingdom of Heaven is not clear-cut to human thinking. We have to understand God's way of doing. And it seems to me that Jesus nixes the impulse his followers might have to go determine what is a weed and then to pull it up. The master's workers ask him, "do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." As Jesus explained to the disciples, the "Son of Man will send his angels" to do the weeding out. So the message is that there is a judgment to come and the righteous will be harvested and the weeds destroyed. This leaves us to wonder about who is wheat and who is weeds and what does God want us to do with that?

Problem in the World

Friday morning I was greeted by a Google Doodle as I connected to the internet. I have come to love Google Doodles because they are creative and charming and I usually learn something unexpected. July 18th is Mandela Day, a day to honor the legacy of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's former President, through volunteering and community service. Mandela Day is a global call to action that celebrates the idea that each individual has the power to transform the world, the ability to make an impact. Nelson Mandela was born on July 18 in 1917, in a small village on the southeastern coast of South Africa in a region called Transkei. In the 1970's, the South African government set up the area as one of the two *homelands* for Xhosa-speaking people in Cape Province. Transkei represented a significant president and historic turning point in South Africa's policy of apartheid and "separate development"; it was the first of four territories to be declared independent of South Africa. South African Prime Minister B. J. Vorster justified the declaration of Transkei as an independent republic by referring to "the right of every people to have full control over its own affairs" and wished "Transkei and its leaders God's richest blessings on the road ahead." What a lovely gesture and prayer. The international community unilaterally condemned the establishment of these independent homelands within South Africa because the government was using them to cement the apartheid system and make it easier to separate out the African indigenous peoples from those of European ancestry. The Apartheid government wanted to once and for all to separate what it considered the weeds from the wheat. As these policies were being put into place, Nelson Mandela watched from behind prison walls at Robben Island, sentenced to life

imprisonment, set aside as a weed pulled from South African soil. Who were the weeds and who were shafts of wheat in those days? I think the answer is fairly murky. You might have thought I would have said it was clear who the bad guys were and who the righteous were, but the story in South Africa was complicated. In the 1960's, Mandela was surrounded by rightly angry people who were in a great struggle for their freedom. There were voices among the African National Conference to violent action and civil war. But Mandela was one who came to see a larger picture: that there was wheat growing alongside the weeds even among the White government in South Africa. Mandela's strong leadership was to peaceful change and forgiveness. After his release from 26 years on prison in 1990 and his election into the office of the presidency in 1994 of the very same South Africa which had sentenced him to prison he wrote, "People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite, ... Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never explained." (Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom) Mandela taught the black majority to forgive the white minority, despite the decades of hardship and humiliation suffered by the former and inflicted by the latter, to build a reunited South Africa. (quote from Google Doodle.) I believe Mandela was a great human being because he saw his fellow human beings as wheat and called for the wheat around him to grow strong and tall despite the weeds of racism and greed.

Closer to our time and our lives in the Americas, we have the situation of the children from Central America trying to cross our border in search of a better place to grow up. It is another clouded situation, with complex causes and which has set off a storm of reaction here in the US. Whatever the causes, whatever the politics of our understandings of the issue, how do we encourage wheat to grow in the midst of this disaster? I have learned that there are over 100 children in the City of Alexandria who fall into the category of unaccompanied minors who are awaiting adjudication for either deportation or placement with relatives in the US because they have fled desperate situations in their homelands. The crisis is not at the border with Mexico, it is right here in our field. How is our community bearing this responsibility? How can we be wheat in this field where we have been planted and the weeds seem to be growing fast? How do we become Kingdom people encouraging the good seed, encouraging the wheat to grow rather than wrong-headed servants searching for ways to uproot weeds and taking out ourselves in the process?

The Grace in the Gospel

For any crisis with weeds, the first step is to remember whose we are: The grace in all of this is that Jesus has sown good seed. As he explained the meaning of the parable to his disciples, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom." The good news is that we are all children of God. We are all good seed. Each and every one of us is good seed – even those whom we would have thought were evil weeds. The field is the world and it is all good ground because God has created it. We need to hold fast to this Truth. When we are seeing ourselves in that light, then we can see the weeds around us, threatening to encroach: the weeds of hate, selfishness, suspicion, greed, war – all of the things that are NOT of the Son of Man. Whatever is not founded upon love is a weed. Jesus also told his disciples, "the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age." Some of the weeds can be deceptively lovely and seem to give us strength and power and stability through wealth, or ambition, or our own strivings - but if they are not love, they will be burned away in the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Kingdom, all of the weeds will be burned away and nothing will stand between us except love.

Grace in the World

We do see glimpses of this future that will come at what Jesus calls, "at the end of the age." We are called by his example to try and live into the Kingdom where we are, in our field. Hopefully you have had a chance to read some of the blogs posted by our mission team which was in New Jersey this past week.

Each summer for over a decade, a team of adults and youth have headed into a community to help them rebuild and to experience the hope found in Christ in our Church community at large. Although this year's team of 19 was very busy working on a home that has languished for two years since hurricane Sandy, they found some time to spare to write about their daily experiences.

I was particularly struck by one story from the week, in light of today's Gospel reading. The home they have been working on belongs to Mrs. Patty. She toured the site a few days after the team began their work and was so thoroughly grateful for the work the team had done. While focusing on this one home the team also met some of the neighbors. The blogger wrote about one encounter with the man next door, writing that one of the adult team members *"had the pleasure of touring the man's home... as well as hearing his tragic story. Super storm Sandy really gave this man's life a wallop. The American Red Cross has offered to pay for repairs, the extent of which is vast but not quite entirely understood yet, but this man has been unable to pay his property taxes over the past few years, so the city is set to repossess his home.*

This man, a former construction man himself, a cancer survivor, a man who's fortunate enough to have survived back and neck breaks...is teetering on the brink of "I don't know what's next." Worried about what tomorrow has in store for him, he asked if there was anything we could do for him, to which we (and hopefully you) offer up our prayers. That being said, if there is a way we can fulfill our duties to our assigned job, as well as provide assistance to him, we will."

This neighbor had suffered personal disasters that can derail any of us: loss of health and then loss of employment -and then Hurricane Sandy hit. This child of God is surrounded by weeds that threaten to choke all hope for him. It seems he was tossed upon a shore of hopelessness and desperation after the storm swept through his life. Our team member reached out and I think showed the concern that comes out of seeing him as beloved and not as a weed. We do not know what will come out of this short encounter of perhaps one hour on a random day, but I can guarantee you that both the team member and the neighbor will be stronger for it. They each reached through and beyond the weeds and felt the light of hope "shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" during their time together.

Experiences like those found in New Jersey become part of the field upon which our community at Grace Church grows. We are not the ones God is calling to pull the weeds (that is the task of the angels.) We are to live into the vision of the Kingdom of Heaven as a field of wheat growing strong together despite, and maybe even because of, the weeds that crowd around us. We can look to great ones for inspiration, like Nelson Mandela who called for honor and dignity and reconciliation and not succumbing to the temptation to name others as weeds and to pull them up in trying times. We can be inspired by the witness of our members who have gone out on mission and encountered hope among the weeds. We can reach out to neighbors and stand for their dignity and show them the hope we share in Christ. Our task is to help others to grow into their fullness in the Kingdom by reaching across the weeds, calling them beloved, and helping them to grow taller than the weeds that threaten us all.

Amen.