

Sermon "What about the Weeds" July 23, 2017

(Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 86:11-17; Romans 8:12-16; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

May the mumbling of my mouth and the searching of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God. Amen

Opening

Last Sunday Eleanor Snell led us in a thoughtful reflection on the parable of soils. Today's gospel lesson is another parable about a farmer sowing a crop, just as in last week's gospel reading. But today the parable takes a different twist. On the way we'll also consider some of the other scripture texts read today.

Ingried and I recently went to see the play "Yellowbellies" by *Theatre of the Beat and No Discernable Key*. As I read the parable of the wheat and the weeds and various commentaries I thought of the *other* Mennonite young men, those who signed up and went to war against the church's commitment to peace.

Listen to this excerpt from a recent on-line article describing interviews in, Manitoba.

<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/lestweforget/A-soldier-shunned-230552091.html>

When the Second World War was called, more than 100 young men from Altona answered. At the time, in the early 1940s, the southern Manitoba hamlet was almost exclusively a community of Mennonites, where the first language on the streets was low German.

When Peter Driedger's parents received a notice that their son was missing in action and presumed dead no family members came to console them.

To understand the reception that awaited those men who returned from the war to their town is to know why the Altona United Church exists.

Why? Because those returning soldiers were given two choices: Publicly apologize for joining the war effort or have their names taken off the Mennonite church register. Altona United Church was founded by Second World War veterans of Mennonite descent.

Peter Braun refused to confess to his Mennonite congregation. "He felt it was his duty," said Anne Braun, now a widow, sitting in the pews of the United Church. "My husband said he could never apologize for protecting his own country."

Even more than 60 years later, the subject of their loved ones being spurned by their family and church is fraught with emotion. "I think my husband felt it more from his own family than the community," Anne says, of the cold reception.

His response was, in her words, "Okay, you don't want us? We'll figure this out." And so Altona United Church was born.

Matthew

Let's look at today's parable.

I love parables because parables are among the most creative and revealing communications in the Bible. A parable tells a story to communicate something by analogy or comparison. By reading back through the story, we catch glimpses of the story teller or the times in which the person lived.

Today's parable begins with "the kingdom of heaven is like". We could spend our entire time today exploring the phrase "kingdom of heaven". We often think of "kingdom of heaven" as referring to a location, the place we go when we die, as the-place-where-God-lives-that-is-out-there-but-not-here. However, the word translated as "kingdom" (*basileia*) is derived from the verb (*basileio*) that means to rule or to reign. So the meaning "kingdom of heaven" is not so much about the location or territory, but more about the authority and influence of the ruler. That's why some translations speak of the "Reign of God" instead of the "Kingdom of God". This is one of the parables in which Jesus tells a story of what life is like where God rules.

So let's look at the story:

- a field of wheat has been planted, an enemy secretly sows weed seeds afterwards
- when the grain heads begin to develop the servants realize there are weeds in the field
- they ask the owner, where'd the weeds come from?
- owner says "an enemy sowed them"
- servants ask should we pull the weeds?
- owner says, no, because you'll pull up wheat with the weeds, let them grow and at harvest the workers will bundle the weeds for burning

Biblical commentator Joachim Jeremias explains that the details of the parable tell a realistic story. The word translated as "weeds" is likely a specific species of weed that looks a lot like wheat when it is young and is only clearly distinguishable when the grain head appears.

READ v. 26 *"So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well".*

Additionally, in ancient Palestine bundles of straw were used as fuel for heating baking ovens
READ v.30 *"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".*

So the detection of weeds and the direction to gather them for fuel paints a recognizable scenario for the audience. What may have been surprising for the audience is the decision to let weeds grow amidst the crop.

Commentators such as Jeremias & CH Dodd point out that the literary setting of this parable in Matt does most likely not give us the setting or conversation in which Jesus actually told this story. This insight is based partly on the fact that the allegorical interpretation given by Matt, while useful for teaching in the life of the church that grew after Jesus, actually overlooks the Question and Answer at the heart of the parable – which is the servants asking ... "should we

pull up the weeds” and the owner’s response “no, let them grow, until harvest”. This exchange is missing in Matthew’s allegorical explanation.

A likely context where that heart of the parable would have been “on point” is the debate about purity. Jeremias describes that one of the hot debates of the time in Judaism was the importance of purity from sin in establishing or preparing for the messianic kingdom of God. Pharisees maintained strict purity in order to obey God (eg. in Luke 7 while Jesus is his guest, Simon the Pharisee is aghast that Jesus would let a woman who is a known sinner touch his feet). The Essenes kept an even stricter purity by living in a completely separate community in the desert near the Dead Sea in order to avoid contact and defilement with sinners.

What was Jesus’ position in this debate? ...well, he counted tax collectors, a Zealot, and common fishermen among his closest disciples. According to Matt 9:11 he was known to *eat* with sinners. He sat at table with them! In Matt 19:11 we have record of Jesus being called a glutton and drunkard who ate with tax collectors and sinners. Recall the story of Jesus being challenged when he didn’t reprimand his disciples for working on the Sabbath because they were hungry and picked some wheat. In Mark 2 Jesus says in reply that “Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath”. In other words, the law was made to serve people, not people to serve the law.

And that’s the issue – how strictly is the law to be maintained? And especially how important is it to remain pure by avoiding defilement by association with sinners who break the law? How are we called to respond to someone who sins.

Such a debate may have been the context for this parable. A *pharisaic* version of the parable might have begun like this ... “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a field of wheat that has no weeds, any weeds that sneak in must be rooted out!” Now, a field of wheat without weeds is a beautiful sight. But Jesus says in this parable, have patience, don’t act in judgment before the time of harvest. And *that* is how Jesus is described as living: socializing with tax collectors and other sinners, fraternising with a Samaritan woman, counselling that a woman caught in adultery not be stoned. Let good and bad, the clean and unclean, the weeds and the wheat be together and it’ll get sorted out at harvest time.

Pause

Then we have **Psalm 86**. Read v.11 Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.

This passage calls for an undivided heart, we could say a “pure” heart. To walk completely in the way of God’s truth, which v.15 describes as being “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” We are called to walk in that truth with our whole heart.

This is not a call for a heart with a mixture of clean and unclean. The Psalmist says in v. 12 “With my whole heart I will glorify your name forever.” The one activity of the heart forever.

Romans

In our Roman passage today, Paul speaks of the option of living according to the flesh (our physical body) which leads to death or according to the spirit which leads to life. We won’t join the 2000 years of theologizing about whether Paul meant that our literal physical body is evil in and of itself.

Whether he meant “the flesh” in a way that we call “literally”, or metaphorically somehow, the point is the same. As children of God we are called to root out from our lives that which is counter to the Spirit of God. And the Holy Spirit assures our own spirit that we are indeed children of God. Paul clearly has in mind a call to living a pure life, not a life mixed of mixed right and wrong, of embracing the weeds among the wheat.

Matthew 18

Interestingly, there also the passage in Matthew 18 that is not among our readings today. Here Jesus gives instruction about how to respond to a brother or sister who has sinned. First approach them by yourself, then with another, then, if necessary, in front of the congregation. It is following that passage, which ends with “treat that person like a Gentile or tax collector” that lead to the expulsion (rooting out) from Mennonite fellowship of the soldiers returning home after WWII.

Pause

Conclusion

On the face of it, our texts today give a conflicting message. On one hand we have the call to whole-hearted purity in Ps 86 and Rom 8, with some practical advice for maintaining a pure community in Matt 18. On the other hand we have a parable from Jesus that coaches us to let good and evil grow together, not to enforce purity or to rip out evil. It seems we are called to incompatible directions.

So what are we to make of this?

For one, note

1. The Psalmist is speaking in the first person singular. Ps 86 calls each person to a heart wholly dedicated to worshipping the God of steadfast love and faithfulness. In Romans Paul calls each person to live according to the Spirit, and he doesn’t mean live partially according to the Spirit, he means become a *whole* new person.

Whereas the object of Jesus' parable seems to be more communal, looking at wheat and weeds in a community, not at each person's heart. Certainly the allegorical interpretation provided by Matthew understood the parable to be talking about a community of many individuals ... some people are likened to wheat and some to weeds.

Secondly, note

1. Paul, who calls us to purity in our reading today, confesses in Rom 7, just prior to today's passage, "the good I want I don't do, the evil I don't want I do". In other words, the reality is different than the aspiration, than the calling.

I don't think that Jesus was claiming in this parable to be imparting a universal truth that good and evil must always be allowed to co-exist. In the context of the debate how to relate with sinners, those deemed impure, this was his perspective: grow together, have patience and let God judge sin and purity at the harvest.

Jesus' parable illustrates what it looks like when a person practices the way of God that Ps 86 calls 'slow to anger'. "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." In the face of weeds growing among the wheat, the landowner demonstrates the Way of the God in the Kingdom of heaven.

I see this as also being our reality. Each of us is called to live a life entirely pleasing to God. Yet we live in a mixed reality. We are not purely obedient or consistent with the Way lived by Jesus, as a community, or as individuals. But we've started. The kingdom of God is already here, growing!

In the mean time we live in grace, committing ourselves completely to living according to the Spirit, being "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" with everyone we meet. There are times when it is faithful, for now, to leave the weeds growing among the wheat.

What do you think?

Reread opening story ...

May God guide us and grant us wisdom as we live faithfully in these days of the Kingdom of God growing on earth. Amen.