

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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“Who am I to Judge”

I must say I do feel a bit awkward reflecting on these parables in the face of our Master-Gardener Pastor, our beautifully kept vegetable garden and grounds, and dedication to our native plant project... Remember: parables offer metaphors! ... O well, Come Holy Spirit!

Our Pope Francis has called this section of Matthew’s Gospel: “the Mother of all Parables” – and that seems very consistent with the fact that undoubtedly he is best known for his early statement – made in response to questions about the status of LGBTQ+ Persons in the church: “Who am I to judge?” A statement that as much as anything symbolizes his papacy – characterizing the core mission of our Church as a field hospital of mercy.

It strikes me, that this question – as confusing and difficult as it is – is the core of our Gospel today: “Who am I – ...or Pope Francis, ...or you, ...or anyone among us – to pass judgment on another?” And given that, how are we to respond to evil and division and suffering...? How do we live in a world plagued by evil and division and suffering – without judging?

That’s the question we’re confronted with in today’s portion of the Gospel. A landowner’s servants notify him that his crops have been corrupted. Somebody has sown **alien** seed in the field reserved for wheat. The servants – no doubt feeling that they will be blamed for this mess – are quick to offer to rid the field of the invasion. But the wise landowner has a different point of view. He’s not ready to make a final determination about the worth of everything growing out there. There may be some surprises, and harvest time will tell the final tale.

Here it’s important to remember that the whole point of these parables for Jesus is to communicate the nature of the Kingdom of God – which he is preaching is “at hand” – in our hands...

There’s no doubt that the landowner sees his servants’ eagerness to clear the weeds as potentially problematic. The fundamental question that arises here is, of course: “Just what is a weed?” The standard definition of a weed is “a plant considered undesirable in a particular situation, growing where it conflicts with human preferences, needs, or goals.” *Notice: nothing “intrinsic” to the plant!*

AND, of course, the next questions include: “What is undesirable?” AND “to whom?” The servants saw the weeds as undesirable. The owner saw the servants’ lack of understanding about weeds as undesirable.

When Jesus interpreted the parable of the weeds, he talked about the world with good and evil people, and he made clear that the task of weeding questionable people out of the community was not part of the disciples’ job description. Speaking as the landowner, he mandated that there was to be **no weeding!** The sifting would happen at harvest. Until then, everything would have its *chance to grow*.

People quick to weed think they understand just how **things should be**. The “weeds” upset what they perceive as the divinely sanctioned order of the world: a well-cleared field with one, meticulously organic, crop. These people are like the stereotypical Pharisees of Jesus’ time or self-defined religious perfectionists of any age. They interpret precisely how strict rules apply to each situation and strive to maintain themselves in pure virtue. They maintain that contact with anyone or anything “unclean” diminishes their holiness. Perhaps, not too unlike the “Christian Nationalists” Fr. Fred talked about a couple weeks ago... with their agenda to uproot anything *they define as weeds*...

Jesus in his time was hated by people like this — Jesus touched the unclean, ate with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, and – as Theologian, Sister Mary Mc Glore suggests: “generally seemed to relish activities that were the symbolic equivalent of blowing dandelion seeds over every manicured lawn he came near”!

SO: As difficult as it may be for us to grasp, it appears that the kingdom of God allows for **both what we recognize** as wheat AND for – how can I put it... plants “other than wheat” – *to coexist*... – a powerful admonition against divisiveness and **retaliatory** response. The evil one comes when we’re not looking to sow something other than our wheat... **tempting us by dividing us ... to narcissistically uproot everything...**

The Second Parable we hear today tells the beloved story of God the farmer/gardener planting a mustard seed. What we may not realize is that for a first-century audience, Jesus might as well have been talking about planting some invasive species – like kudzu, that rapidly spreading vine that has been known to take-over power lines and highways. Like this, the mustard plant was invasive and would eventually take over the whole field. At the time, its extraordinary growth would hardly be considered a blessing.

SO what is Jesus telling us?

When Jesus says that the Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed – it’s not meant as simply an inspirational nod that “great things can grow from tiny beginnings” – though that’s related. He’s likely talking about something growing surprisingly and impressively well, **much to the irritation of the establishment.** — Coming on the heels of the teaching that wheat and weeds are to be allowed to grow together, Jesus’ story of the farmer planting a mustard seed, again tells us something about the Kingdom of God, rooted in Jesus own vision and planted in the hearts of his little group of disciples. In the end, the Mustard Tree – sheltering the diversity of God’s creatures – will be the centerpiece of the garden!

Finally, today we hear of God the baker-woman who starts with three measures of flour – NOTE: that’s about 50 pounds! She might well have been worried, but, with *her patient kneading*, the little bit of *leaven / yeast* did its trick, *fermenting the whole batch.*

What might **we** take away from these parable?

FIRST: I think we should notice that our “farmer” God is best understood as more **pro-wheat** than **anti-weeds** - -- if you pull out what you think are weeds, he says, you will likely uproot the wheat along with them. He is committed to **keeping the soil intact and the wheat alive so it can grow....** and *perhaps* to see if – the so-called “weeds” may have something of their own to contribute...

SECOND: To understand that our divine “landowner” God – unlike us – holds the long-view... God sees what is present and clearly recognizes an enemy has been at work and that the “weeds” (**Yes, God IS the One “to judge”!**) are right there with the wheat – why wouldn’t weeds be attracted to the beautiful rich soil every bit as much as good seed? Yet, God understands that all can wait until the harvest to – if necessary – separate the wheat out - again with an eye to preserving the wheat and, perhaps, giving time for the so-called “weeds” *to grow into* something positive ...

THIRD: AND I think SO important, is to recognize that Jesus is NOT advocating a passive approach to life, a wait and see attitude... a biblical version of “don’t worry be happy.” Rather he was insistent that *now is the time for our action* -- for each of us to turn to new life in the Kingdom of God. **We are to respond to the presence of evil and suffering without judging others, BUT by cultivating mercy and goodwill in our own actions – in the fields, as it were, in which we are servants. As our Fr. Andy always tells us: “To respond to evil with good”!**

The Farmer's approach is one of patience and forbearance ... recognizing that acting hastily will bring about a **future that holds no promise for any crop – for any one...**

As we've been hearing in our reflections these past weeks: In the Kindom of God, the response to the challenges posed by the reality of evil is not judgment and division but compassion, compassion, compassion.

When we listen to these parables in these weeks of summer, we're challenged to ask what *we're* called to think, say and **do**. One of the first things, it seems, is to **reassess** who we define as "other-than-wheat" and – following Pope Francis – who should take it upon themselves to uproot, excommunicate, reject, arrest, demonize or deport them. In the face of so much talk in our nation, world and even church about *aliens* – who's legal or not – we need to have some serious reflection and **discussion among people of faith about what is truly alien to the Kindom of heaven.**

As a number of you know, over the last week or so, out of curiosity, I've been asking folks to define compassion, and there was pretty universal agreement that compassion means to *recognize and empathize with another's suffering*. Yes!! Compassion does literally mean "to suffer together." However, I think what many left unsaid – and as I think is exemplified in Jesus's ministry – compassion, as opposed to merely an emotional feeling of empathy or sympathy – is defined more fully as "the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering **AND feel motivated to relieve that suffering.**" Compassion, it is said, puts love into action.

Our first reading today from the Book of Wisdom shares an extraordinary picture of how God, the ultimate "judge" of all things, confronted with a suffering Creation, a broken and hurting humanity, responds. Rather than with our presumed sense of "justice," the God described and praised here **wields power through lenience** – sounding a lot like that crazy landowner who left the weeds to grow. **Room to grow may be the core divine gift today's readings talk about.** Just listen to the last line of the Wisdom reading – with a lovely nod to our agricultural parables: "*You gave your children **good ground for hope** that you would permit repentance for their sins.*" Now that's really "Good News!"

As Pope Francis puts it: "A world in which smiting quickly followed sin would result in many being smitten but few coming to know God's love and abundant mercy that gives us so much more than we deserve."

Finally, in our personal reflections on the wheat and the weeds, ... it may be useful to remember that from root to flower, dandelions are highly nutritious plants loaded with vitamins, minerals, and fiber; and are also the source – I understand – of a lovely wine! Amen!