



Making ourselves at home among the wheat and the weeds

Earlier this summer we heard the parable of the weeds among the wheat. As part of trying to make Zoom worship a bit more interactive, our parish is using a form of shared homily to respond to the Gospel reading after our priest gives his reflections. It's been illuminating to hear directly from laypeople about their approach to scripture, and to hear more than we usually do about how those interpretations apply to the challenges of daily life. It's also, at times, been both a source of connection and an underscoring of deep differences among members of the Body of Christ. Sometimes, I haven't felt quite at home.

There's also been quite a lot of commentary from clergy about the demands of faith in the current environment, both as we deal with the ongoing impact of the pandemic and address significant matters of politics, race, and justice. We've read quotes and reflections from several Episcopal priests who used the parable to highlight current events. Some of those comments leave me feeling not quite at home, as well.

²⁴ He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 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, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

This particular parable seems to pull readers in specific directions. Two main kinds of responses stood out as I noticed my own thoughts, as well as those of other lay people and clergy:

The first kind of response is rather friendly—we're each a nice, country gardener with a comfortably disheveled patch of earth. Sometimes weeds are as beautiful as the flowers we planted. It's not up to us to sort anything – who are we to say to say there are bad weeds or good wheat? And all plants kind of look alike if you squint your eyes.

The second kind of response—and I heard this more frequently—is to assume we need to go

get those weeds! Weeds are terrible! We need to get in there and rip them out from the roots so we can burn them! Weeds seem to be an easy target for our wrath and if we direct our indignation rightly, we will conquer them. Often, it seems we can slide right into the role of the angry gardener.

This second response easily diverges into politically conservative and liberal versions. The exact words may differ, and the policy content surely does, but generally we'll know what our own tribe thinks of as "weeds." Sometimes it's subtle, and sometimes it's explicit. What's challenging is to recognize how easy it is for many of us to conflate our political views and our faith. Often, we can bend our faith to our politics, and somehow assume that either the Republican or Democratic party platforms are a new Creed, and obviously God participated in their drafting. What the religious life requires, though, is ensuring we've examined our politics—and the ways we express and advance our politics as we engage other human beings—in light of our faith.

I personally found myself going all directions—the friendly gardener, the angry gardener, the partisan gardener who is sometimes friendly and sometimes angry, but still partisan—before I'd taken some time to listen. It strikes me that all of these approaches illustrate how we can use the Gospel to reinforce our own bias. The parables are particularly good at this because they, by their nature, are contradictory and hold the seemingly unreconcilable together. In different ways, any of our tendencies to find "the answer" shows how we can choose to avoid what Jesus is actually saying. Or, more pointedly, to avoid what we need to hear.

"The morally conservative crowd don't like that he won't name sinners more directly or call out their sin; the political radicals want him to definitively state who the enemy of God's kingdom is and call for some sort of uprising against it."¹ It can be frustrating that neither of those is where Jesus goes.

He does seem to assume we know there's a difference between wheat and weeds, and that the difference matters. But I wonder if it's harder to see ourselves *as* the wheat, to see ourselves *as* the weeds, to recognize ourselves in the slave. We aren't the Master, and we're not the Reaper. We don't get to control everything. Enemies come; they may be us. We may look and feel like a vigorous stalk of grain and then find we are an invasive or toxic variety. There will be a reckoning, but it seems pretty clear we're not in charge of it and we may not like the results. There is uncertainty and mystery in all of it, yet also a call for continuing discernment. We can't rest easy.

We can find ourselves avoiding this. At times, we can't quite stay with the images. Maybe we move into our anger and judgment and search for the weeds to stamp them out, not quite realizing we're also stamping out the wheat. Maybe we start with the kind of righteous anger that has fueled all great quests for justice—a vision of how far we are from God's Kingdom, along with a clarity that the Kingdom is also here now and that we can harness our power to raise up the downtrodden and give comfort to the afflicted.

¹ From an article written by the Rev. Francis Delaplain and posted on The Anglican Planet: <https://anglicanplanet.net/wheat-and-tares/>

But we can also just find ourselves angry and judgmental and resentful, and basically comfortable with that because we're so *right*. Anger, judgment, and resentment can feel like home.

If a foundation of the spiritual life is to be at home in all circumstances, maybe we need to find a new home, or at least an expanded sense of what "home" is. It's not simply being comfortable, though sometimes it gives us comfort. We almost certainly need to be less comfortable with our anger and judgment and resentment, and perhaps more comfortable with our uncertainty and grief and hopefulness.

Being at home doesn't mean never being angry or never making judgments—our encounters with the complex reality of the world often involve both. Each of us is called to struggle for justice and truth, and it can be hard to face into that struggle when we aren't in control. It can be hard when we know how right we are and how wrong the "other side" is. Yet when the struggle becomes hostile, when we lose our sense of God's mercy and compassion, and of our own capacity to share in that compassion, our struggle is more likely to tear down and not build up.

"We are not equipped to judge the level of good or evil in another's heart. Nor do we know the end from the beginning. As people formed by Jesus' act of grace, we must act in grace. We must reach out in grace to those on the other side of our lines, for the cross reaches across our evil to us: it is grace in the face of your evil, that you may be healed, that you may be saved."²

For Episcopalians, our spiritual life and growth is grounded in prayer, including our common prayer in the daily Office and the Eucharist, as well as our own personal forms of prayer. Becoming more at home in all circumstances does seem connected with basing our prayer in what is. That includes recognizing God's grace and compassion, and recognizing where we are channels of that grace and compassion, as well as some of the places where we are not.

We can give some of our prayer to contemplation. To simply being present and aware before God, and enjoying that presence. Developing our capacity to seek and enjoy the presence of God helps us see him when we don't expect it, including in the people and circumstances that cause us the most pain.

We can steep ourselves in scripture through the Office and the Eucharist. We can read with the "ear of the heart," listening quietly, letting ourselves be shaped and inspired by its mystery and the ways it lets us enter more fully into our risen life in Christ. We don't have to solve everything, including our internal contradictions. Noticing they exist may be enough for this moment. We can listen for the Word God has for us today, even when it feels confusing, challenging, or uncomfortable. We can choose to be mostly concerned with the "log of weeds"³ in our own eye. Over time, maybe our home is less about the easy comfort of being right, and more about partaking of the comfort borne of joining in the expansive love of God.

² Ibid.

³ An image used by Matthew Cowden in his article Don't Pull: The Parable of the Weeds and Wheat.

<https://www.matthewcowden.com/2018/08/25/dont-pull-the-parable-of-the-weeds-and-wheat/>

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