

Proper 11 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Last week we heard Christ's teachings about the parable of the sower, and I mentioned that Jesus often does not explain his parables to those who are listening. Usually that is because the only people who need to have his parables explained are those who do not agree with him, like Pharisees or other temple authorities. However, the parable of the sower was a bit unusual in that Christ actually did explain what he meant by the parable to his followers. So it's even more unusual that right after explaining the parable of the sower, Christ explains yet another parable to his followers.

This week we hear the parable of the weeds. There's a farmer who plants wheat, only to have an enemy come and plant weeds among the wheat. So when the wheat began to grow, so did weeds. The farmer's slaves asked the farmer if he wanted them to pull out the weeds, but the farmer pointed out this would not only uproot the bad plants, but also the good wheat. So the farmer decides that at harvest time, the plants will be separated, with the wheat going into the barn and the weeds being burned.

Just like last week, Jesus' followers ask him to explain this parable. And just as was the case last week, Jesus gave them an interpretation. Yet there is another meaning to this parable that we often don't think about. The first explanation is the one that most of us probably have for this parable—the wheat are righteous people and the weeds are evil people, and at the end of the age when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead, the righteous will be saved and the evil will burn in hell forever. Depending on the person, this interpretation of the parable can either be comforting or terrifying. If you're the type of person that sees yourself as flawed, but basically good, then you're probably comforted by this parable. You probably identify yourself as the good wheat which will be saved at the end of the age. However, if you're the type of person to fixate on your flaws and wrongdoings while often ignoring the good you do, this interpretation may be frightening. You probably worry about just how bad someone has to be to be considered one of the weeds, and whether or not your wrongdoings, even if they aren't that big of a deal in the grand scheme of things, might land you in that category—condemning you to the furnace of fire.

But Christ's explanation doesn't necessarily lead us to that view of the parable. Christ tells his followers that the good seeds are the children of the kingdom, that is true. And the weeds are the children of the evil one. Yet as Paul points out, not one person is righteous. Everyone has sinned. Everyone has at some point in their lives given in to the temptation of the evil one. As Paul points out in the epistle today, we are each in debt because, though we are not righteous, and though we do not deserve to be called children of God, Christ's intercession on our behalf allows us to claim that status, "for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." While we can be considered children of God because of what Christ has done for us, we can also be considered children of the evil one due to our sinful nature. Even the most devout Christian is not immune to the temptations of evil. Even the most devout Christian has sinned.

Keeping this in mind, even those of us who consider ourselves to be mostly good may be a bit uneasy reading the parable of the weeds today. How good do we have to be to be considered wheat? How bad do we have to be before we get thrown in with the weeds? How do I know what is going to happen to me at the end of the age?

As was the case last week, I think another, perhaps less considered interpretation of Jesus' parable may be more helpful to us. We all do good and we all do bad. We all have certain aspects of our lives that seem to fit in with the wheat and others that much more resemble weeds. But as tempting as it may be for us to try to weigh the good against the bad in ourselves to figure out which side of the fiery furnace we're going to land on, Paul might be able to help us shed some light on another way to look at this parable.

Paul is always quick to remind us that every person has sinned. And later on in the book of Romans Paul reminds us not to judge one another, “for we all stand before the judgment seat of God,” and “each of us will be accountable to God.” It seems that each one of us will have to give an explanation to God as to every aspect of our lives—the good and the bad, the wheat and the weeds. Yet only those that put aside the flesh and take on the spirit may be joint heirs of everlasting life with Christ. So then if each of us is good and bad, yet nothing bad can enter into the kingdom of God, then the final judgment must purge us of all of the evil that is within us, of all of the sins we have committed. So once we have made an accounting of all we have done, the wheat will be gathered up and the weeds will be burned in unquenchable fire. It is no surprise then, that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, as each person must stand before God and face not only the good they have accomplished in their lives, but the evils they have committed.

Though this all sounds a bit painful, it is in fact good news. Though we may get caught up worrying about whether we are good or bad, whether we are wheat or weeds, we don’t actually need to be so concerned. Whether we are more wheat than weeds does not determine our fate, but the identity of the sower, who will make the final judgement. And our sower is Christ Jesus, who was without sin, and who was crucified so that we might be freed from sin and death. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, instead of being condemned for our sins, our sins are wiped away, and we are able to inherit everlasting life. Though we may be concerned about the final judgment, we do not need to be afraid. Though it will likely not be a pain-free process, we know that the sufferings we will endure “are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” So we “groan inwardly while we wait for adoption,” but we know that through Christ we have been saved, and we will one day “shine like the sun in the kingdom of our Father.” Amen.