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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 11, Series A (Pentecost 7)
Saturday, July 22nd, 2017
Sunday, July 23rd, 2017

Sermon: The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Focus: The Lord is patient with sinners, giving us time to repent.

Function: That they would not be quick to judge or condemn others.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: “In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth...” (SC, 3rd Article of the Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Have you ever noticed that some people at our congregation don’t really seem to fit well? In fact, many of them don’t really seem like they would belong at *any* church. They don’t think like us or talk like us. And, worst of all, they certainly don’t *believe* like us. They may have strange ideas about how to interpret the Bible or think that certain passages of Scripture aren’t binding or important. On the theological spectrum, they are left of center. They probably grew up in one of those liberal Protestant denominations that picks and chooses which parts of the Bible it wants to accept. Yet before they walked through the door, couldn’t they tell that we aren’t just any old Lutheran church—that we’re The Lutheran Church—*Missouri* Synod?! L-C-M-S.

Other people seem like they don’t belong at our church, not because of theological differences, but because of their sinful living. Maybe they drink too much, or lose their temper at church meetings, or bear grudges and gossip about other people. They’re just too arrogant and full of themselves or downright mean and nasty. Quite frankly, they don’t really act like Christians, and so you have a hard time believing that they *are* Christians. Maybe some of them go to church just to make their spouse happy. Others see church as a good social outlet, a fun

place to “hang out” with other people, but not necessarily an important part of their spiritual life. Some of them might see our fellowship as a networking opportunity to develop clients and build their business. And an even smaller group of people might be plain evil—wolves in sheep’s clothing—who are literally hell-bent undermining the ministry of Christ’s Church.

And what are we supposed to *do* about these people? Clearly, they are a threat to the peace and unity of our congregation—and the entire Body of Christ. Can we really coexist with them in the Lord’s Church? Isn’t there something we can do to identify them and “weed them out”? *Surely*, there *must* be something we can do to weed them out in order to protect our church and have a more pure fellowship?

Well, this might surprise you, but heretics and hypocrites are nothing new in the Christian Church. Since the earliest days of Jesus and the Apostles, one of the disciples—Judas—was both thief and traitor. And before his Ascension, Jesus knew that his Church would be rocked by divisions, rivalries, jealousies, scandal, and false teachers. Of course, he also knew that the Church’s pastors and people would struggle to figure out what to do about those “problem people.”

So he told them a story to teach them what to do: the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, or, if you are more familiar with its title in the King James Version, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. (*Aside*: As a child, I didn’t know what a tare was and thought the preacher was saying, “The wheat and the *terrors*”! Of course, the weeds are a terror in Jesus’ story).

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven, or kingdom of God, is like a farmer sowing seed in his field (Matt. 13:24). This earthy story with a heavenly meaning starts out sounding a lot like last week’s Parable of the Sower. But the mention of the kingdom of heaven is new. Actually, kingdom is a poor translation for the Greek word (*basileia*). In English, we think of a

kingdom as a place you can point to on a map. Thus, we imagine that the kingdom of heaven might be the Church or even heaven itself. But Jesus is more interested in speaking about the king's *activity* than the place where the king rules. And so a better understanding of the so-called "kingdom" is actually the gracious rule and reign of God. It's God doing God's thing here on earth right now.

The purpose, then, of the kingdom parables in Jesus' teaching is to tell us something about what *God* is doing. God is like a farmer who sows excellent seed in his field. Yet while he is sleeping, his enemy comes and scatters the seeds of weeds on top of it! Bible scholars tell us that the scientific name for this weed is *Lolium temulentum*, commonly known as darnel or "cheat wheat." Darnel is a plant related to wheat that in the early stages of growth looks an awful lot *like* wheat. But darnel is *not* wheat; it's a toxic weed and deadly if you eat too much. When it matures, darnel has black seeds instead of a golden wheat head, and those black seeds are where the poison is.

So when the farmer's servants recognize that weeds are growing in the master's field, they are very concerned. They obviously have the best of intentions when they offer to weed the garden and gather the weeds. They don't want anyone to get sick or die if the darned darnel gets mixed up with the wheat at harvest time, so they want to get rid of it now while it's easier. By the way, not only do they have a good idea, but it's the way that farmers in the ancient world dealt with weeds. They didn't have fancy, computerized combines that could automatically separate the darnel from the wheat. They needed to take care of it right away.

But the master says, "No." He is not your typical farmer. He doesn't take his servants' recommendation and do what makes sense. Rather, he tells them to let the weeds and the wheat grow together. He's worried that in their eagerness to help, if they dig up the weeds, they will

dig up some of the wheat along with it and destroy the good crops. Therefore, he tells them to wait. Then when the harvest comes, they can gather and burn the darned danel before reaping the rest of the field.

But what does this mean? Again, as we discovered last week, the key to interpreting the parables is the mystery or “secret” (Greek: *mysterion*), the bizarre behavior and unexpected twist. Jesus tells his disciples that the eccentric farmer represents himself, Jesus, the Son of Man and Son of God. The good seeds that he sows are his children, the baptized believers who love their Lord and are loved *by* him. But while he is sleeping, his enemy the devil comes and sows his own children right in the middle of the rest of them. The “cheat wheat” or danel represents the unbelievers, hypocrites, and heretics who attach themselves to the visible, institutional church, but are not really part of the true Church because they do not have faith in Christ. As we confess in the Lutheran writings: “Strictly speaking, the Church is the congregation of saints and true believers. However..., many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled within them in this life [Matthew 13:24-30]” (AC VIII, 1). These wicked people cause all kinds of trouble in the Church: worst of all, division, scandal, and false teaching.

So when the Lord’s servants—the pastors and other leaders of the Church—see the hypocrites and heretics, they are rightly concerned about apparent impurity of the congregation. They are eager to “weed out” the wicked and keep a righteous remnant. But Jesus powerfully demonstrates grace and divine forbearance. He tells his servants to be patient and wait for the harvest time, which symbolizes the end of the world. Then, at completion of all things, the angels of God will sort out the weeds from the wheat, the wicked from the righteous, the believers from the unbelievers. The Lord will sort them out so we don’t have to. In the

meantime, Jesus urges us to be patient with the heretics and hypocrites, just as he is patient toward us, “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

For the time being, Jesus is willing to let the weeds creep in among the wheat. He will sort it out on the Last Day. And until that Day, we just need to keep hearing and believing God’s Word, receiving his forgiveness, and growing and bearing the fruit of love that he desires from his forgiven, baptized children.

We must be careful that in our eagerness to clean up the Lord’s garden, we don’t kill the wheat along with the weeds. Last week I told you that I don’t have a green thumb, and I must admit that lawn care is a new exercise for me. When we lived in our townhome in Centennial, the HOA took care of all the yard work, including the weeding and mowing. Now it’s all up to me! Let me tell you: the first time dandelions started popping up in my yard, I activated the nuclear option. I went to Home Depot and bought a big bottle of RoundUp and started spraying any plant in the yard that looked like a weed. And, of course, in the process I killed a lot of green grass. Weed killer doesn’t just kill weeds. It can kill the wheat too.

And who gets to decide the difference between a flower and a weed anyway? When I was a kid, I used to think that dandelions were beautiful, and I would braid and twist them into bracelets and necklaces for my mother and sisters. The raspberry vines were less beautiful and more threatening, poking and cutting with their vicious thorns. Before the berries began to grow, they looked like weeds to me, and I got in trouble for pulling out quite a few raspberry vines before I understood what they were.

We don’t always have a good eye for the difference between the wheat and the weeds. The same is true in the Church. Let’s be careful not to go on a rampage chopping down the weeds only to kill the wheat along with it. After all, just because you don’t *think* somebody

measures up to *your* standard of what it means to be a Christian doesn't mean that they *aren't* a Christian. And even if somebody *isn't* a Christian right now, that doesn't mean he or she will *never* become one. As Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged..." (Matt. 7:1-2a).

I must admit that I think there is another reason why the Sower in Jesus' parable tells the servants not to pull out the weeds until the harvest time. And even though Jesus doesn't say this in his explanation, I think it's in keeping with his character, as revealed in Scripture. I think that one of the reasons the farmer doesn't cut down the weeds right away is because he's giving them time to turn into wheat. Scientifically speaking, I know that would never happen. Weeds and wheat have entirely different DNA and would never change one into the other. Yet spiritually speaking, I am more optimistic. After all, "a bruised reed [Jesus] will not break" (Matt. 12:20). Christ is firm on the Word but gentle in heart. And I have no doubt that the same Jesus who turned water into wine can also turn weeds into wheat, just like he did for me. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear (Matt. 13:43). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.