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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 11, Series A (Pentecost 7)
Saturday, July 18th, 2020
Sunday, July 19th, 2020

Sermon: The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds¹

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 don’t really seem to fit in well at our church? In fact, many 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 we have a hard time believing that they *are* Christians. Maybe some of them

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached on Sunday, July 23rd, 2017, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado.

go to church just to make their spouses happy. Others see church as a kind of social club, 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 just be plain evil—wolves in sheep’s clothing—who are literally hell-bent at 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 such threats 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 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 a thief and a 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. Here is another earthy story with a heavenly meaning. This Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, like the Parable of the Sower last week, begins with another Sower. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven, or reign of God, is like a farmer sowing seed in his field (Matt. 13:24). Yet while the farmhands sleep, the farmer’s enemy comes and scatters the seeds of weeds on top of it! Now I don’t know if you’ve ever been in a feud with a neighbor, but doesn’t

this enemy's action seem extreme?! I mean, have you ever gotten so mad at somebody that you decided to scatter dandelion seeds or crab grass in their yard?

Bible scholars tell us that this bad seed is likely the plant known scientifically as *Lolium temulentum*, a weed commonly called 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 toxic—and deadly if you eat too much. When it matures, darnel has black seeds instead of a golden wheat head, and those black seeds contain the poison. *Darn* that darnel!

So when the farmer's servants (pastors? angels?) recognize that weeds are growing in the master's field, they become very concerned. With the best of intentions, they offer to pull the weeds. They don't want anyone to get sick or die if the tares get 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 ordinarily dealt with weeds. They didn't have fancy, computerized combines that could automatically separate the darnel from the wheat. They didn't have fancy herbicides that targeted the weeds and left the wheat unharmed. So they needed to pull up the darnel as soon as they spotted it.

Last week I told you that I don't have a green thumb, and I must admit that I hate doing yardwork. 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: that first summer at our new house, when dandelions started popping up in the 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 at first I thought that I had succeeded. After all, I killed a lot of weeds. But in the process, I also killed a lot of grass. Weed killer doesn't just kill weeds. It kills the grass too, as I learned the hard way.

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 darnel, they will dig up some of the wheat along with it and destroy the good crops. For the sake of the wheat, he tells them to wait on the weeds. Then when the harvest comes, the angels can gather and burn the tares 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 darnel 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—all of which are toxic and spiritually deadly.

So when the Lord’s servants—the pastors and other leaders of the Church—see the hypocrites and heretics, they are rightly concerned about the apparent impurity of the congregation. They are eager to “weed out” the wicked and keep a righteous remnant. 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. We don't always have a good eye for the difference between the wheat and the weeds. As I mentioned earlier, when I lived at the old townhouse, landscapers hired by the HOA were responsible for all the yard work. When we first moved in, Lisa and I had these lovely bluish-purple columbines in our front yard—the same as the Colorado state flower. Unfortunately, one year before the flowers bloomed, the landscapers pulled them out, mistaking them as *weeds*! Of course, the HOA had to replace them, but they put in these *yellow* columbines instead of the purple ones we loved. In any case, it's not always easy to tell the difference between a flower and a weed.

The same is true in the Church. How do you discern if someone is a weed or a wheat? 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. As Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged..." (Matt. 7:1-2a).

Unlike us, Jesus withholds judgment and powerfully demonstrates grace and forbearance. He tells us to be patient and wait for the harvest time, which symbolizes the end of the world. Then, at the completion of all things, God's angels will sort out the weeds from the wheat, the wicked from the righteous, the unbelievers from the faithful. The Lord will sort them out—so we don't have to! We can leave them be and let God deal with them.

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 allows unbelievers, hypocrites, and boorish sinners to live right alongside the saints. No need to make distinctions now. He will sort us 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.

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 one would never change into the other. Yet spiritually speaking, I am more optimistic. After all, "a bruised reed [Jesus] will not break" (Matt. 12:20). 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.