

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

July 19/20, 2008

“Weeds and Wheat”

Matthew 13:24-30

In last week's Gospel lesson Jesus told a parable that many know as the “Parable of the Sower.” And even if you weren't here last week, I know that you know it. It was a parable of the Kingdom. It told of how a farmer went out to sow seed in his field and how some of that seed fell on the hard ground and because it couldn't sink in, it was quickly snatched away by the birds – how some fell on rocky ground and because it couldn't send down its roots very deep it died – how some fell on thorny ground and because it was choked off by the thorns it also died. But, Jesus said, some of the seed fell on good ground and there it found a home and it grew and it produced an abundant crop yielding 30, 60, even 100 fold.

The meaning of the parable is obvious. The farmer is God Himself and the field is this world. The seed is His Word, specifically the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, come into the world to be the means by which the Kingdom of God is planted in the hearts and lives of people. As the news of the Kingdom is spread through the proclamation of the Gospel it is like seed that is sown on all kinds of ground – that is, it comes to all kinds of people. Some people are like hard ground and the good news bounces off of them and is snatched away. Some are like rocky ground in that they take the news in but not very deeply and it soon withers and dies. Some are like thorny ground in whom the new life is choked off by the worries and cares and concerns of the world. But some are like good ground and take the news to heart and by grace through faith in Jesus Christ are made members of God's Kingdom, His Church, and within that Church they live and grow and produce an abundant life to the glory of God. But you already know all that.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus tells a companion parable known as the “Parable of the Weeds.” It tells of how weeds grow side by side with that which is produced by the good seed of God's Word falling on the good ground of believing hearts and how, therefore, there are both wheat and weeds, both believers and unbelievers in this world.

One needs look no further than Jesus' first disciples to see the point. Many followed him but not all truly believed. Even among his closest followers was one who not only didn't believe but who, in the end, even betrayed him, Judas Ischariot. Was the existence of unbelievers even among the so-called followers of Jesus the result of the inability of good seed to produce a good crop or was it something else? Jesus says in this parable that it isn't the failure of the good seed, that is the Word of God, to produce a good crop, that is the Christian life, but rather it's the result of someone else, the devil, sowing bad seed, unbelief, in the same field. In the end, Jesus reminds us, the continued existence of unbelievers in this world should not surprise us.

So what are we to do? Wouldn't it make sense to just pull up the weeds now, that is, purge the world of all those suspected of not believing and as a result have a pure crop, a perfect world, filled with only believers, a sort of heaven here on earth? "No," says Jesus. For in the process of trying to weed out the unbelievers, some believers might get pulled up as well. Human beings can't know the mind or the heart of another, only God can know. And only God can know who is truly a believer and who isn't. Therefore, Jesus says, do not judge, leave the weed-pulling to God – weed-pulling that will take place at the time of the harvest when God judges the world. In fact, through the power of the Holy Spirit, some weeds may even be turned into wheat before then.

As it was in Jesus' time, so it has been and continues to be to this very day. Wherever good seed is planted and a good crop is produced there can be found a crop of weeds as well. Down through the ages there have been those who, however well-intentioned they might have been, have sought to weed out the unbelievers and make a pure church here on earth. The Inquisition is one good example but there are others and they're not just limited to Christian examples. There are examples from all religions.

And lest we think that such a desire to make a pure church here on earth is limited to the past we are reminded that there continue to be those who even today desire to play God by establishing manmade rules and regulations and, in that, judge others – who promote certain dogma or ways of doing things and then label those who don't agree with them as "unchristian", who use unbiblical means to keep the fellowship limited to those they judge to be like them, who work to establish a heaven here on earth.

This, of course, is not God's way. It is not His intention to uproot the weeds now but rather to foster the growth of the wheat even in the midst of the weeds. While He certainly would not have His Church unconcerned about the unbeliever nor lax in church discipline when it is truly necessary, He would have His Church leave judgment to Him. And, in that, He would have His Church concentrate on planting and cultivating the wheat – that is, proclaiming the Gospel to all nations and making disciples for Christ and, in that, helping all people grow in knowledge and faith and life until He comes to take His people home.

The Church does that when she busies herself with the real work God has given her to do – with the simple proclamation of the good news of the presence of the Kingdom of God in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ – with building people up through the ministry of Word and Sacrament and not tearing them down – and with loving and encouraging others rather than judging and condemning them.

"Weeds and Wheat" May God help us concentrate more on cultivating the wheat and less on pulling the weeds this week. In Jesus' name. Amen.