

Yr. A, Proper 11
July 20, 2008
St. Martin's in the Fields
1539 words

Psalm 86:11-17
Isaiah 44:6-8
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Three hours and thirty five minutes. If I placed our Snapper riding lawn mower in top gear; kept my foot off the brake; whipped the steering wheel tightly around the roughly three dozen pine trees, and the dogwoods and all the azaleas; and did not overlap my pattern of concentric circles by more than an inch on the margin; then I could finish cutting the grass in three hours and thirty five minutes.

Well, to be honest, grass—and weeds. In the South Carolina summer—with its combination of very wet thunderstorms and very bright sunshine—centipede grass tends to need cutting about every two weeks. And the weeds—they really need cutting about twice as often, maybe more. I can remember asking my mother (probably more than once) “How about if I just cut the really high weeds this time?”

It was in the middle of just such a pleading that one of my older sisters interjected unhelpfully, “*What?* You’re complaining about only having to *cut* the weeds...and on a *riding* lawn mower? We used to have to *pull* the weeds—by hand—from the roots, starting all the way out at the road in the heat with the gnats, for hours at a time.”

We grew up in a Church that did not use the lectionary, and so it possible that my sisters never heard this particular parable—which only appears in the Gospel according to St. Matthew—because they most certainly would have appealed to these words of Jesus in order to get out of pulling the weeds.

Even as the teenage weed-pullers among us this morning are realizing the innumerable benefits of getting to know Jesus’ parables, the deeper question for all of us is this:

If Christ has excused us from gathering weeds, why is it that we insist on doing it any way? Why are we so driven to pluck up and get rid of those who are not like us—those who don’t look like us or think like us or practice the same faith or have the same sexual orientation or speak the same language or have the same nationality.

Perhaps our stubborn insistence is why, according to a British Rabbi I learned about recently, there is one instance in the Hebrew Bible commanding love of one’s neighbor, but 36 instances of God commanding love of the stranger.

St. Matthew was writing to a community that was trying to come to terms with why the Gospel was taking hold with some of their fellow Jews and not with others. They were struggling—just like we struggle—with what to do about the messiness of God’s Kingdom.

Let’s face it, we want God’s Kingdom to be pure and clean, orderly and right. Matthew’s community wanted to know who was in and who was out, just like we want to have clear boundaries that separate what (and who) is valuable from what (and who) is noxious.

Have you noticed that we always read this parable as if *we* are the wheat and *someone else* is the weed? Why do you think we do that? I’m not sure why we are so confident of our ‘wheatiness’ and other peoples’ ‘weediness,’ but we often seem to live with that kind of confidence. God knows that we live with that kind of confidence.

I recently finished reading Khaled Hosseini’s first novel, *The Kite Runner*. It is an exceptional book about redemption, and I highly recommend it. It is also a book about ‘weed pulling.’ The main character, Amir, is a

Pashtun and a Sunni Muslim. He grows up as a privileged child in Kabul, Afghanistan. He grows up like wheat, and he is keenly aware of being surrounded by weeds—Hazaras and Shi’a Muslims serving and living within the walls of his compound—weeds that needed to be plucked up and gotten rid of. Little Amir wasn’t quite as smart as he thought. He plucked up some wheat and got rid of it.

Christians are likewise subject to this confidence in our own ‘wheatiness’ and other peoples’ ‘weediness.’ God knows that we live with that kind of confidence—which may explain why we have ended up with this parable in the first place.

Like the eager servants we say, “Master, do you want us to go and gather them?” The Son of Man essentially says in reply, “No. you’re not smart enough to tell the difference, and so you will end up plucking out the good wheat. Just leave it alone and let wheat and the weeds grow together.”¹

Perhaps the most undeniable proof of our not being smart enough to tell the difference is closer than we think. You might say that Western Civilization achieved a remarkable standard of ‘wheatiness’ in Europe less than one hundred years ago. It was a time and place of amazing new discoveries in science and math, stunning achievements in theology and philosophy, art and music, tremendous strides in education and living standards. What happened? The ‘wheat’ became keenly aware of being surrounded by weeds.

These particular weeds were defined as Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and other so called misfits. If you visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. you can see the ways in which the German weeding was done—initially with subtlety and finesse, and ultimately with mania and madness.

What is it about weeds that lead us to become obsessive and compulsive? If Christ has excused us from gathering weeds, why is it that we insist on doing it any way? Jesus has a clear message for us, and it is this: Forget about the weeds. It’s not your problem. Trust God to deal with it.

The Rev. Charles Davis, one of my colleagues at Trinity Cathedral, purportedly offered a memorable and compelling summary of the Gospel last week that seems just as applicable today: “We are called by God to be in sales, not in management.”

This is not to say that we are called to be completely passive in the face of evil or neglectful in matters of injustice. St. Matthew speaks to this a little later in his Gospel² when he urges his listeners to confront wrongdoing. And perhaps the most conspicuous example of evil and injustice in our time involves the plucking up and getting rid of individuals and groups whom we—or others—define as ‘weeds.’

This means the Church’s mission involves careful vigilance about looking out for, and confronting ‘weed pullers’ in places like Auschwitz, Bosnia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Kabul, and Darfur. The Church’s mission also involves careful vigilance about looking out for, and confronting, ‘weed pulling’ *within* the Church—in places like Jerusalem and Rome, from Constantinople to Geneva, in Canterbury and Scotland, in America and in South Carolina, at St. Martin’s in the Fields and in our own individual hearts.

What is it about weeds that cause us to become obsessive and compulsive? If Christ has excused us from gathering weeds, why is it that we insist on doing it any way? Jesus has a clear message for us and it is this: Forget about the weeds. It’s not your problem. Trust God to deal with it.

Yes, our mission is to sow seeds of peace, love and reconciliation in a messy world. God intends to sort out what chokes and obstructs the peaceful, loving and reconciling character of the Kingdom. Part of the grace of

¹ Matthew 13:28-30

² Matthew 18:15-20

being a child of God is having permission to simply forget about the weeds, relax, and trust God to deal with it.

While little Amir grew up in America there was more ‘weed pulling’ in Afghanistan—first by the Soviets, then by the Taliban. There was so much weed and wheat indiscriminately plucked up in Afghanistan that the land and its people were barren, and still are.

The call that came to Amir, a Sunni Muslim living in San Francisco is the same call that comes to us today in this parable through Christ—it is a call to enter the messiness of the world—a world with wheat and also chock full of weeds—not to pluck up, but to plant—to plant peace, love and reconciliation.

I went back to my boyhood home in June to see my mom. I turned off Galilee Road and drove around the semi-circular driveway right up to the front door. They are still there, from the highway to the house. It has been more than forty years since my sisters knelt down in the front yard and pulled weeds—by the roots, mind you—and they are still there.

St. Martin’s is not all that different. There is a lot about St. Martin’s to celebrate.

This is a special place with plenty of wheat. There are many wonderful people seeking to live faithfully in a Christian community and to participate in the Church’s mission and ministry in the world. And there are also weeds—always have been. As with any parish there are weeds among the wheat. And there’s also some really Good News!

Part of the Good News is that the Kingdom of God is big enough to have room for both wheat and weeds. Another part of the Good News is that even though we are not smart enough to sort out the wheat from the weeds, God is. But the best part of the Good News comes straight from Jesus: Forget about the weeds. It’s not your problem. Trust God to deal with it.

For now, let’s just keep planting peace, love and reconciliation.

Amen.