

## Proper 11, Pentecost X July 20, 2008

It seems to happen every few months—sometimes more often. I'll be talking to someone, they find out what I do, and, I guess needing to justify themselves in the presence of a clergyman, they proceed to tell me why they don't go to church. (For some reason, lots of people assume that I *want* to know this, or that I *need* to know this). And, often as not, they will tell me, either generally or in great detail, how not everything and not every one in church has been to their liking. They might be angry at something that happened six months or thirty years ago, or they might know a church-goer or two whom they believe to be a through-going scoundrel. Then, having somehow explained themselves, (although I am never quite certain exactly how), the conversation can return to whatever it was before they discovered I was a priest. Sigh. Anyway, that's one way to handle a less than perfect church.

In the parable of the weeds we just heard, Jesus offers a different way to look at the same thing—a different perspective on both the Church's many and varied failings, and on the issue of the reality of sin and imperfection within the Christian community.

It's a great parable. First of all, it's helpful to note that the weeds in the parable are a specific plant called darnel, and it was a real bane to farmers. Darnel's growing habits are virtually identical to those of wheat. At the early stages, there really was no way to distinguish between them, and by the time the two had headed out and it becomes possible to tell them apart, their roots had so grown together that to pull out one was to destroy other. (In fact, spreading Darnel seeds in another farmer's field was common enough to be specifically prohibited by law.)

So, the parable is totally realistic—it describes a situation that was immediately recognized by the folks who first heard it; and, as opposed to some other parables, it's also easy enough for us to understand: the parable says that it's not the business of the hired help to decide what should and should not be growing in the field. That particular question will be handled by a higher authority—and at a later date.

From the very earliest days, the church has understood that this parable is about us. It's a way of talking about the reality of sin and of sinners among us—something we've always known about. Let's face it, not only is there no guarantee that the church generally, or any particular part of it, is going to be free from sin or from sinners, but we are also pretty much promised otherwise. There is no magic spell cast over those doors that either keeps out the less than perfect (thanks be to God, or both the pews and the pulpit would always be empty) or that instantly transforms, cleans up and fixes, anyone who comes through them. That's the way it's always been, that's the way it is, and that's the way it always will be, this side of the kingdom.

Instead of a perfect church, Jesus gives us this parable. I suspect that one reason he picked this example is because he knew that something the parable talks about, pulling weeds—passing judgement as to who is good enough to associate with the fine, upstanding, fruitful wheat, and who really belongs out there in the fire—that doing this can be so darn much fun. Heaven only knows that enough time is spent doing exactly that. And it does feel good, in a furtive sort of way, to wander mentally through the field, yanking up a handful here and there.

At least it feels good as long as we don't think very clearly about what we are doing.

Once we do that, once we say things like “What I’m doing here is deciding that, with everything about me that only God and I know, I still belong here, while old so, (or some group or collection of people) whose inner life and struggles I can’t even imagine, don’t belong here, or at least they don’t belong here without some acerbic comment from me.” When we start putting things that way, the glamor begins to fade.

Also, it’s interesting and important to note that in all of Jesus’ parables of judgment—and there are quite a few of them—in all of these, judgment is always reserved to God—and judgment is always reserved until the end. We are *always* forbidden to judge the soul of another person. Jesus really wants us to remember both that we did not do the planting and that we do not give the growth.

Besides, there is enough to do *within* ourselves to keep us occupied. Look at it this way, if we gotta pull weeds, we might as well work on those nearest at hand—those which are a part of who we are. It is strange how glibly we insist upon change in others while at the same time, both resisting and resenting any suggestions that we ourselves have areas in our lives that need some real work. But there you are.

Even though each and every one of us knows, very personally, how terribly difficult getting from where we are to where we need to be can be for ourselves—still, we are strangely reluctant to give as much charity to others as we are accustomed to giving ourselves. We need to flip that around, and tighten up a bit on ourselves. **We** are the one we need to work on the hardest, and Lord knows, we all have enough to do there—plenty of weeds to pull.

And we need to do that in at least two ways. First of all, we are called to help God form us more nearly into the image of Christ—to grow in grace and holiness. At the same time, we also have another goal, the goal of community. The goal of growing together, and building up and supporting one another. We are in this together.

What God finally has in store for any one of us at the end is not ours to predict. However, what God has in store for us *now* is both our personal call to growth and our corporate call to community and to service.

So here we are, living together in a situation very much like the field in our Lord's parable. Some wheat and some weeds, some good and some bad—both among us and, perhaps especially, within us. And we are growing in such a way as our roots are intertwined, our lives are connected to each other in a basic and fundamental way. We are called to live together and to grow together in patience and in hope.

And there is one more thing. Unlike either wheat or weeds, we do have the power to change, to cooperate with God in becoming more than we are now. So we are also given *time*, as we are given one another, and we are told not to judge, but to grow; not to cast down others, but to build up ourselves and the communities we are a part of, and to do it all with thanksgiving.

After all, it's all a gift—the life, the field we live in, and the vast undeterminable variety of people who are growing along with us—it's all a gift. God has the end of things under control; and for right now, we have plenty to do.