

# Letting God Sort It Out

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**July 20, 2008 | Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 11)**

## Lectionary citations

Gen 28:10-19a with Ps 139:1-12, 23-24

Rom 8:12-25

Matt 13:24-30, 36-43

Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.

We really do not like weeds. I have hired a friend, Ted, to help me catch up with clearing out my enormous yard of downed limbs and dead trees. As we got into the northwest corner of the yard, we started hitting large amounts of poison ivy. Ted likes to do his yard work in shorts and athletic shoes, shirt optional. He is also sensitive to poison ivy. The results have been predictable. However, even I, with my work boots, jeans, and long sleeve shirts, have gotten a little rash around my wrists and ankles. Out comes the Roundup and the poison ivy and any weed next to it is under sentence of death. Of course, I have no inclination to even try to have the perfect yard. I am happy to have a little real grass among all the wild plants and wild flowers in my yard. However, we have all known or have heard about someone who devotes tremendous time, money, and toxic chemicals to eradicating every trace of dandelion, crabgrass, and any other weed from their yard. Farmers certainly aspire to monoculture—each field should have the single desired crop plant. Any other plants steal resources from the crop and contaminate the harvest. Although we might enjoy garlic bread, nobody deliberately grows garlicky wheat. Environmentalists and naturalists, of course frown on this, arguing that a natural yard or farm should be an ecology with a variety of native plants. Hah! When we see a weed, most of us have an overwhelming impulse to pull it up, chop it down, or poison it. Yet improper weeding can actually spread the weeds, and too much herbicide will kill beneficial plants.

The tares of the parable are believed to be the bearded darnel, a species of rye grass that looks almost identical to wheat until the seed head appears. Farmers also call it “cheat.” Tares, or a fungus that lives in the seed head, can cause sickness and intoxication if eaten by people or livestock. Tares are common in the Holy Land. Therefore, it is natural that some tares might spring up among the wheat. There are indications from history that it was not unheard of for feuds between neighbors or between landowners and tenants to result in malicious over sowing with weeds. Because tares and wheat sprouts are almost identical, trying to weed tares from among the wheat before the seed head forms is simply impossible. Since the parable assumes harvesting by hand with a sickle, it would later be possible, if time and labor consuming, to separate the tares from the wheat at harvest. It is quite logical to burn the tares as fuel and to prevent them from spreading their seed.

Our Gospel reading includes the official interpretation of the parable, given by Jesus, in private, to the disciples. This reading emphasizes the harvest by the angels sent by the Son of Man that separates the bad from the good. It also focuses on the destruction of “everything that causes sin and all who do evil” and the glorification of the good in the Kingdom of God. This interpretation says that, although we may not always be able to detect and punish evil, we can be sure that, in the end, God will destroy the wicked and reward the good. This interpretation has value for me. I know that evil is real and is powerful. Human beings alone will never be able to remove evil from the world. In fact, every time we try to eradicate evil, we just make things worse. The prohibition of alcohol by the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment is a classic example of how the Christian impulse to clean up the world ends up making things dirtier—leading to bootlegging, corruption, and organized crime. The best we can do expect to do is to channel and control evil and create islands of good, sanctuaries, and safe places, including our churches. There are truly evil things that harm everything they touch. They will not enter the Kingdom. There are truly evil people, who have chosen not to be forgiven and saved. They will not live in the Kingdom. We hope for the day when the Son of Man sends his angels to “collect out of his kingdom all

causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire." Of course, we may be surprised at what God excludes from the Kingdom and what he lets in, but it is *his* Kingdom, so let God be the judge!

Those who are afraid of overzealous attempts to purify the church emphasize a different element of the parable, the landowner telling the servants not to weed, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them." Too much emphasis on purity can destroy the peace of the Church, disrupting its ministry and mission. Remember that Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." If the church is a "hospital for sinners," it is not logical to throw all the sinners out and lock the doors.

This part of the parable is dear to the hearts of those church people, including many of us in the UCC, who believe the church can accommodate a wide variety of theological, ethical, and moral viewpoints. This interpretation emphasizes that in real life, things are not always black and white, and that people, viewpoints, and behaviors that we may find difficult to accept may actually be working for the Kingdom of God. Because of this uncertainty, it is again better to let God be the judge.

Typical of this approach is Jeanyne B. Slettom of Claremont School of Theology who states, "...the ministry of Jesus makes clear the nature of "good seed." It is a commitment to justice, inclusion, and equality, with attention paid to the least among us, and the basic needs of food, clothing, and visitation met." Good servants are those who continue to spread this Gospel. According to this interpretation of the parable, bad servants are those who, instead of sowing the good seed, cannot resist pulling up the weeds. "They are weed pullers. They are ignoring the teaching of Christ. They are so concerned with other people's morality that they labor in the fields of the Lord not sowing good seed, but pulling up perceived weeds. They have so narrowly defined "weeds" in terms of sexuality that they

miss whole fields overrun with greed and injustice. The parable of the wheat and the tares is a cautionary tale, warning us to beware of the weed pulling impulse—the moral need to improve the field based on our own limited judgment.” This interpretation shifts the focus of judgment away from the weeds and onto the imagined disobedient servants, the “weed pullers.” As this shows, parables are fun to work with because they can be interpreted in many different ways.

Let me suggest another interpretation, which appeals to me as a counselor. The field is my heart. I was born with God’s good seed sown in my heart. That is, I was born with the potential to love God and my neighbor. My family and church did their best to sow more good seed, and to nurture its growth. However, in this fallen world, there were many times when I was morally asleep and the adversary had plenty of time to sow the seeds of sin in my heart. As I grew up, my heart filled up with all kinds of green shoots—ideas, impulses, feelings, desires, habits, inclinations, dreams—some of them are obviously good or bad, but most are unformed—they can become either wheat or tares. Trying to weed out the tares too early is harmful. Each green shoot has to be given time to mature, to come to seed, so it can be harvested and judged. Each day is a harvest in my heart, but I cannot handle it on my own. I must invite the Holy Spirit to separate the wheat from the tares, and send each to the barn or the furnace. The danger is when I delay the harvest, when I refuse to be judged. Then the wheat and tares grow rank together and the harvest rots in the field.

To me the harvest is so important because I need skilled and careful reapers to distinguish between wheat and tares. I have found from painful experience that I cannot accept my thoughts, desires, and impulses on their face value. What seems good may in fact be harmful: Religious piety may be a mask for pride, love hides resentment, and an impulse to help others can conceal a selfish drive for attention and recognition. Am I ready to burn those tares? What seems harmful can in fact be good:

anger flags injustice, sadness is a sign of hidden growth, and restlessness provides energy for positive change. Am I willing to let those wheat stalks come to harvest?

Harvest brings joy, but also the suffering that comes from burning up the lies we have become comfortable living with. Harvest time requires prayer, careful thought, and, for me, consultation with counselors and spiritual advisors. Most of all the harvest requires the angel sent by the Son of Man—the Holy Spirit. As you can see, when I interpret the parable, I focus on the harvest time and it becomes a parable of sanctifying grace, the life long process of removing all the causes of sin and all the evil from my heart. The good that I harvest, the wheat, goes to the barns, is loaded up, and sent out into my life—where I do my best to share it with everyone I meet.

I believe those who selected the Epistle reading for today saw the connection between the harvest of wheat and tares and the Holy Spirit. We can identify Paul's "flesh" with the tares and his "spirit" with the wheat. "Putting to death the deeds of the body" is harvesting the tares and sending them to the furnace. If we call on God to send the angels to our harvest, we are "led by the Spirit of God" and we "are children of God." If we accept the Holy Spirit, we will not be afraid of the harvest. "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." Yet the harvest is not without suffering. For some of our ideas, impulses, and desires near and dear to us are destined for the flames. Accepting the gift of sanctification, subjecting ourselves to the cleansing harvest is really taking up the cross. "When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." Amen.

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