



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Weeds or Wheat?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 19, 2020

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Isaiah 44:6-8; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

There's an old story about a dark and stormy night, and a man is standing on the rail of a high bridge. A passerby noticed the man, and, realizing what might be about to happen, climbed up to him and said,

"Please don't! Don't jump!"

"Why shouldn't I?" said the man.

His would-be rescuer responded,

"Because there is so much to live for."

"Like what?" the man replied.

"Well, are you a religious person or an atheist?"

"I'm religious," the man said.

"So am I!" said the rescuer.

"Are you a Christian or a person of another faith?"

"I'm a Christian," the man replied.

"Me too! Are you Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too! Are you mainline or Evangelical?"

"Evangelical."

"Me too! Are you a Baptist by any chance?"

"Yes, I am a Baptist."

"Wow," said the rescuer. "So am I!"

"Baptist Church of Christ or Baptist Church of God?"

"Church of God," the man said as he began to move closer to the rescuer.

"Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God or Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed" said the man, now relaxed enough to smile.

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformed 1879 or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformed 1915?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformed 1915," the man said excitedly.

To which the rescuer scowled and said,

"Die you heretic scum!" as he promptly pushed him off the bridge."ⁱ

Now I trust you understand that wasn't a true story. It's a kind of parable, if you will, and, like all parables, it reveals a formidable truth. (And, I should acknowledge that you can tell the same story about

Episcopalians, but it just doesn't get as big of a laugh!) I honestly thought it was just a funny story until I was appointed a delegate to the World Council of Churches, which was meeting in Busan, South Korea, in 2013.

Representing the Episcopal Church, I traveled to Korea, imagining the transcendent spiritual experience I was about to have as Christians from every denomination gathered together from around the globe for this meeting. What I didn't imagine were the shouting matches I witnessed between robed Orthodox monks and men and women from progressive American and European Christian traditions. What I didn't expect were homophobic rants and other behaviors more suited to a poorly-run elementary school playground than to an international Christian conference. Tolerance and forbearance were in mighty short supply, and it didn't take me long to realize that I was part of the group some considered to be "heretic scum." Christians believe we are good at identifying who the weeds are. We believe we can tell, with a high degree of certainty, the good from the bad.

But you can't always tell the weeds from the wheat.

The parable of *The Weeds Sown Amongst the Wheat* (along with *The Parable of the Sower* we heard last week) appear in the Bible only in The Gospel According to Matthew. Last week, all the seed was good and had been sown by a good sower. In this week's parable, some of the seed is bad and it's been sown by a sower with evil intent. The seed is the essential metaphor.

Experts say the weeds to which Jesus refers in this morning's lesson, the bearded darnel, is a devil of a weed. Known in biblical terms as "tares," bearded darnel is a weed with (virtually) no virtue. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks almost identical to wheat until it bears seed, and those seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death. No wonder Jesus uses this noxious "cheat weed" to illustrate evil incarnate. Bearded darnel is the botanical equivalent of the "ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing about which (Jesus) has already warned."ⁱⁱ

"Do you want us to go and gather up the weeds?" It is the most understandable of impulses. When we see the weeds strangling the good plants, everything within us says we should go and remove them. Anglican priest Charles Kingsley, preaching in the late 1800's, observed that the removal of the weeds "...was distinctly spiritual... the first impulse of spiritual men, who love right, and hate wrong, and desire to cultivate the one, and exterminate the other. To root out the tares; to put down bad men and wrong thoughts by force, is one of the earliest religious instincts. It is the child's instinct... pardonable, though mistaken."ⁱⁱⁱ The "child's instinct" indeed.

In this parable, Jesus reminds those of us who are imperfect to be very careful about judging others who are *also* imperfect, especially with any sense of finality. Good and evil exist side-by-side in the world, as it does within each one of us. Carl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, would often say of the self-proclaimed virtuous: "The brighter the halo, the smellier the feet."^{iv}

Still, we would make a grave error if we interpret today's gospel as a call to passivity in the face of evil. Congressman and Civil Rights legend John Lewis, whose death we mourn this week, famously said, "When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to do something."^v Those are not only the words of a Civil Rights activist. Those are the words of a deep Christian who put his life at risk for the Christian principles in which he devoutly believed.

Theologian James Cook echoes this thought when he writes, "There is no divine command here to ignore injustice in the world, or violence in society, or wrongs done in the church. Obviously, when faced with such evils we should do all in our power to stop them. But today's gospel is a realistic reminder that 'we

see through a glass darkly.’ ...that our powers of judgement and discernment are always hindered by our all-too-human frailties and foibles. So, we need to be careful. Very careful. But at the same time, we can rest assured that God already has a plan for dealing with the weeds, so we don’t have to worry about it.”^{vi}

Within this parable is a profound challenge: to *trust* God and to *believe* God knows what God is doing! We have to believe God will handle the weeds. We have to trust, as God says through the prophet Isaiah, that “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me.”

This is also to trust, when confronted with the gospel’s call for kindness and forbearance on the one hand and the world’s call for revenge and vindication on the other, that responding to the gospel imperative will always be the better and the much higher calling.

You cannot always tell the weeds from the wheat.

Edward Jenner was born in Berkeley, England, in 1749, the son of the local vicar. At the age of 14, he was apprenticed to a local surgeon and later trained in London. In 1796, he carried out his now famous vaccination experiment on eight-year-old James Phipps. Jenner inserted secretions taken from a cowpox abscess into an incision on the boy’s arm.

Jenner proved that having been inoculated with cowpox, Phipps was now immune to smallpox. He submitted a paper to the Royal Society in 1797 describing his experiment, but was told his ideas were too revolutionary and that he needed more proof. Undaunted, Jenner continued to conduct experiments, and in 1798 his results were finally published. Jenner coined the word “vaccine” from the Latin word *vacca* for “cow.”

You might imagine a grateful populace showered him with appreciation and praise, but you would be wrong. He was widely ridiculed for his work. Critics, especially the clergy, claimed it was repulsive and ungodly to inoculate someone with material from a diseased animal. A satirical cartoon of 1802 showed people who had been vaccinated sprouting cows’ heads. (And we think Dr. Fauci has it tough!). Over time, the obvious advantages of vaccination and the protection it provided became clear, and vaccination soon became commonplace. It is estimated that Jenner’s discovery has saved more than 50 million lives. And yet, still today on the internet, you will find writers who vociferously argue against the efficacy of his work.

We cannot always tell the weeds from the wheat.

Consider another scientist, Louis Pasteur. Francis Burgess writes, “When (Pasteur) declared that the silkworm disease was caused by tiny parasites, he was showered with popular ridicule and the Academy of Science passed a vote of public censure. Every succeeding discovery was followed by further abuse. Yet today, Pasteur is acclaimed as the greatest scientist France has ever produced.”^{vii} And one of the greatest scientists ever.

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In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” I don’t know that I’ve ever lived in a time when I was more desperate for Paul’s observation to be revealed as true. Surely the sufferings of this present time will be eclipsed by the glory about to be revealed to us. Surely, we pray, the senseless deaths will cease, the suffering will subside, the economic ruin will be restored, the hungry will find food, and the hopeless will find hope.

I have my own list of weeds I'd like to try to eradicate. I'm certain you have yours, as well. But that is not my job, nor is it yours. I'm afraid that task, dear friends, is way above our pay grade.

Our job, our job is to continue to grow the wheat. Our job is to plant small seeds, to water and to nurture and to care for them and to protect them until the unspeakable glory of that Great Harvest finally comes to pass.

Amen.

ⁱ Copied, source unknown

ⁱⁱ *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 3, edited by David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, c. 2011, page 260

ⁱⁱⁱ The Reverend Charles Kingsley, *Discipline and Other Sermons; Sermon on Toleration, Matthew 13:24-30*, Macmillan and Company, c. 1899, page 278

^{iv} Carl Jung, *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 11, July 21, 2002*, page 4

^v *Newsweek Magazine, Ten Quotes from the Late Civil Rights Icon John Lewis*, by James Crowley, July 18, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/10-quotes-john-lewis-civil-rights-icon-died-rip-1518831>

^{vi} Jim Cook, *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 11, July 20, 2008*, page 2

^{vii} Francis G. Burgess, *Talks on the Prayer Book Gospels*, Morehouse Publishing Company, New York & Milwaukee, pages 37-38 as quoted in *Synthesis, Year A, Proper 11, July 18, 1999*, page 2

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