

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2023

Of all the parables Jesus told, I think the Weeds in the Wheat is perhaps the most important. It responds to the question that still plagues every generation of believers: *why do bad things keep happening in a redeemed world?* Our faith professes that Jesus has conquered sin and death on the Cross, but we know all too well how present they are in our world. If God is all-powerful and all-good, why does evil exist?

I chose the shorter form of the Gospel not just to save time, but because that is what the crowds would have heard and had to wrestle with, and ask, “Just what was Jesus trying to tell us?” But they would have known a few things in his story that may not be so obvious to us.

The weeds Jesus refers to – *zizania* in the Greek – is what we would call darnel. It is one of a family of grasses that even experienced farmers would easily mistake for wheat before it was fully mature. At earlier stages, they are indistinguishable, and their roots would intertwine closely. And, unlike the wheat that was essential to making bread, darnel seed was at least mildly poisonous. If you ate it you would feel drunk and nauseous. *But if you wanted to grow wheat, the possibility of darnel was something you would just have to face.*

At that level, the story might be simply about waiting, abiding in patience until it becomes clear what is useful and what is useless or even dangerous. The darnel eventually grew taller than the wheat, so the harvester who waits could first go through and cut off the darnel heads, and then glean the wheat crop afterwards. That natural lesson is still relevant to us, for we can be quick to judge and easily mistake things we happen not to like for things that are in fact harmful. We can be rash judges, even of ourselves. To inherit the eventual good, Jesus is saying, we must endure the mix of what is a problem and what is full of promise, lest we uproot so much that we end up with nothing at all.

But Jesus is doing more than giving sound middle-Eastern farming advice. God sows only the good, but there is an enemy that seeks to separate us from God’s love, and desires to mislead us to choose the harmful, even though it may appear good to us. We naturally think of Satan here, and the Gospels are

filled with this conflict between Christ, our Advocate, and that envious Enemy of the children of God. But remember that Satan has no real power. Elsewhere, Jesus calls him the Father of Lies; but no deception can ever make us choose. It can only confuse us about what merely attractive and what is truly of value in God's eyes. Sowing confusion and doubt is evil's number one strategy.

So the parable also teaches us the wisdom of patient trust that God will sort out the good and the evil when time ends and judgment comes. *Until then, we simply will live in an imperfect world.* We cannot undo or prevent all the evil that we will encounter, *but we can respond in three ways.* **First**, to help those who suffer in whatever ways open to us. Here, we can think of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Stations of the Cross – Mary, Veronica, and Simon of Cyrene could not prevent the Crucifixion, but each in his or her own way did something concrete to humanize Jesus's suffering with their love, compassion and strength. We can do the same. **Second**, to choose to act in ways that do not add to the problems people face. Maybe we can't make it better, but we can always make it worse. And **third**, to pray sincerely for the coming of the Kingdom, the harvest that in the end will resolve the evil so that only the good remains. // This leads to one last lesson implied by the parable. *If there are weeds in the wheat, it means there is also wheat among the weeds.* If we focus on the problems, after a while that becomes all we can see, all that seems real. But we can also trust in the slow and silent growth of the wheat, even among the darnel. Look for the good, for it is truly there, and foster its growth in your life and relationships.

The wheat that is in the Host you will receive today no doubt also grew up with weeds. But it is about to become the Body of Christ, the Bread of Life. When we are filled with Him, the weeds have no room to grow.