

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 7/17/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
Text: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Those of you who were in church last weekend can take a nap during the first three minutes of this sermon. That's because I'm going to introduce today's Gospel reading in exactly the way I introduced last week's text. You've already heard it, so we'll tell you when to wake up for the new stuff.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew begins with these words: "Jesus put before them another parable." Parables seemed to be Jesus' specialty. A parable is a simple story, usually about something familiar to the listener, which makes a point or two. Jesus used parables primarily to explain the unexplainable – to paint pictures of who God is and of what the kingdom of God is like. Jesus' parables almost always had a surprising twist to them, so that things didn't turn out the way that his hearers expected. The kingdom of heaven, according to Jesus, was not what his hearers' had thought it was.

Jesus usually spoke in parables that were fairly open-ended. The stories could be held up and examined from lots of angles, with some different possibilities for interpretation. He very seldom assigned clear, point-for-point explanations to his parables. This is one of the reasons why many biblical scholars aren't convinced that the straightforward interpretation that Jesus gave the disciples after he told the parable that we just heard was, in fact, his. It's likely that an early faith community, struggling with persecution and with a strong sense that the end of the world was imminent, added that explanation to the parable and attributed it to Jesus, because that particular interpretation made the parable so meaningful to them in their specific context.

That's the brilliance of Jesus' parables. They're really timeless. There's always something to be gleaned from these ancient stories. And if we're not rigid about assigning only one very specific meaning to them, then the stories remain vibrant, current, and relevant. They're as valuable to us today, as we try to understand what the kingdom of God looks like now, as they were to those who actually heard Jesus himself tell the stories, and as they were to those who probably added the interpretation.

In my sermon last week, I suggested that we temporarily let go of the explanation following the parable of the sower, who sowed seed that fell on different types of soil, with varying results. I'm going to ask the same thing today concerning the interpretation that follows the parable of the good seeds growing with the weeds. It seems to me that the parable itself, as Jesus probably told it, and without the commentary that might not have been his, has a lot to say to us about the kingdom of God.

You may now wake up those who are snoozing.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like this: A farmer scatters good seed in a field. The good seed grows, and it produces wheat. But when everyone is asleep, an enemy sows weeds in the same field, so that the ground yields both good and bad produce.

Those who work in the field have a couple of choices about how to deal with this mixed crop. One would be to remove the weeds as soon as they appear, so that the harvest remains pure. Another would be to wait until the harvest to separate the two. From an agricultural point of view, there are advantages and disadvantages to both methods. In this parable, the person in charge makes the decision that it's more important that none of the wheat be uprooted than that the weeds be removed immediately. "Let both of them grow together until the harvest," the master determines.

The kingdom of heaven is not just about life after death. The kingdom of God is also right here, right now. And according to this parable, the kingdom of God is sort of a mess. It's a mixed bag of good and bad, with an abundant production of both wheat and weeds.

This picture of God's present reign isn't how I would have planned it, had anyone asked me. But it does seem to accurately reflect our day-to-day reality. As people who are seeking to know, love, and follow God, we surely experience our share of joys and blessings – the miracle of birth and the gift of children, the fulfillment of work that challenges us and that uses our gifts, the pleasure of relationships when love and respect abound, the experience of our senses in a world filled with beauty.

And, as people who are seeking to know, love, and follow God, we also experience our share of pain, loss, and the consequences of evil and injustice. We weep at the frustration of infertility and of our children's struggles with social, academic, and health issues. We worry about the inability to find fulfilling work ... or the inability to find work at all. We know all too well the deep sorrow that results from broken and lost relationships, and we experience the pain, limitations, and uncertainty that come with debilitating illnesses. At the back of our mind and in our gut is a constant feeling of unease, reinforced with every terrorist attack, wherever it takes place.

Life in the kingdom of God as we know it is truly a mixed bag of the good and the bad. The field that is our world doesn't produce only good wheat just because God is in charge. And the weeds aren't there because God's punishing anyone.

As people who seek to know, love, and follow God, we tend to attribute the blessings of life more to the graciousness of God than to our sense of being entitled to them. Yet, when the difficulties come, we often wonder what we did to deserve such hardship. I can't tell you the number of times that someone in the hospital has asked, "Why did God do this to me?" Inevitably, when a tragedy occurs, the victim, or his or her family asks, "Why did God allow this to happen?"

It seems to me that the bottom line, according to this parable, is that life itself is a gift from God – a good gift, with blessings abounding. And, life is hard, painful, unpredictable, and very much a mixed bag. The weeds grow together with the wheat. That's just the way it is.

The wheat and the weeds will, ultimately, be separated. The redeeming work of God through Jesus Christ is being realized and will be fulfilled. But the time frame and the process itself are up to the master, not to the wheat. And until then, what's most important is that the wheat not be uprooted. What's most important is that the wheat grows, flourishes, and produces an abundant harvest.

You and I have the opportunity to intentionally live a God-centered life, in grateful response to the redeeming work of Jesus Christ in our lives and in the world. We can choose to focus at least as much on the blessings as on the hardships. We can become so grounded in the life and teaching of Jesus that we recognize the healing love and the redeeming work of God when it's in front of us, and we can join God in that work. We can pray – opening our hearts to the love and presence of God and honestly acknowledging all that we desire and all that we fear. We can actively seek to discern the sometimes subtle difference between good and evil, speaking out and acting for justice, without becoming obsessed with blame, judgment, and revenge, or letting the injustice in the world overwhelm us, and suffocate our joy.

Life is an extraordinary gift. Evil, with all of its consequences, is a reality. The kingdom of God, here and now, is sort of a mess. Nevertheless, we're called to live in it – even thrive in it, despite everything that's far from perfect. This is by no means an easy calling. But the One who has called us is here in the middle of this mess with us – as our strength, our path, and our guide. May we, with God's help, stand firmly in the mess, as people whose lives are rooted in and defined by love, generosity, justice, gratitude, and forgiveness. Amen.