

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I WAS SERVING A CONGREGATION WHOSE BUILDING WAS GOTHIC WITH A TALL STEEPLE AND WIDE FRONT DOORS. IT SAT BACK FROM THE BUSY INTERSTATE, CREATING A VIEW THAT WAS WELCOMING TO THE EYE. IT WAS PRETTY ENOUGH TO BE ON A POSTCARD, OR SO I THOUGHT UNTIL THE FIRST SPRING CAME. I WAS EXPECTING A NICE CARPET OF GRASS TO APPEAR, BUT WHAT SHOWED UP INSTEAD WAS EVERYTHING BUT GRASS. DANDELIONS, THISTLES AND CRABGRASS COVERED THE FRONT YARD.

I GENTLY TRIED BRINGING UP THE MATTER TO THE PROPERTY COMMITTEE BUT THE CHAIR QUICKLY TOLD ME: “WHEN WE MOW, NO ONE WILL BE ABLE TO TELL WHETHER IT’S WEEDS OR GRASS. WE CUT IT DOWN CLOSE, IT ALL JUST LOOKS GREEN.”

ONE DAY JESUS TOLD A STORY IN WHICH WEEDS WERE PROMINENTLY FEATURED. THE STORY IS WHAT WE CALL A PARABLE, A SHORT NARRATIVE THAT USES ORDINARY EVENTS AND OBJECTS THAT ARE A PART OF DAILY LIFE TO SHOW US SOMETHING IMPORTANT ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. IN TODAY’S PARABLE, A WEED IS NOT A WEED. IT REPRESENTS THE SIN, THE EVIL DOING, AND EVERYTHING ELSE THAT WORKS AGAINST THE GREAT PURPOSES OF GOD.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE PARABLE IS THIS: THE HOUSEHOLDER SOWS GOOD SEED IN HIS FIELD. THAT NIGHT, WHILE EVERYONE IS SLEEPING, THE ENEMY COMES AND SOWS WEEDS RIGHT IN THE SAME FIELD WHERE THE WHEAT HAS BEEN PLANTED. NO ONE REALIZES IT UNTIL SPRING COMES, AND THE WEEDS RISE OUT OF THE GROUND RIGHT ALONGSIDE THE WHEAT. THIS SCENE WAS ANYTHING BUT POSTCARD PERFECT. A MIXED-UP MESS WAS WHAT IT WAS. YOU CAN’T TELL WHERE THE GOOD STOPS AND THE BAD BEGINS.

THE SERVANTS GO TO THEIR MASTER AND ASK, “WHERE DID THESE WEEDS COME FROM?”

THE MASTER ANSWERS, “THE ENEMY PLANTED THEM.”

“DON’T YOU WANT US TO PULL THEM UP?”

“NO,” THE MASTER ANSWERS. IF YOU DO THAT, YOU MIGHT UPROOT THE WHEAT ALONG WITH THE WEEDS. LET THEM GROW UNTIL HARVEST TIME, AND THEN I’LL TELL THE REAPERS TO COLLECT THE WEEDS FIRST, TIE THEM INTO BUNDLES TO BE BURNED AS FUEL, AND THE WHEAT WILL BE GATHERED INTO MY BARN.”

NOTICE THE MASTER ISN’T WORRIED IN THE LEAST THAT THE WHEAT WILL GET CHOKED OUT BY THE WEEDS. HE KNOWS THAT WHAT HE PLANTED WILL COME TO HARVEST. WE KNOW IT, TOO. BUT SOMETIMES WE FORGET. NOTHING CAN STOP GOD’S WORK IN CHRIST. HIS KINGDOM IS FOREVER. EVEN WHEN IT’S DIFFICULT TO DISCERN SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM, THE SEEDS OF SALVATION ARE ALIVE AND WELL, GROWING, ALWAYS GROWING IN OUR MIDST.

ONE OF THE THINGS I LOVE ABOUT THIS PARABLE IS THAT NOT ONLY DID THE WEEDS NOT HAVE THE EFFECT THE ENEMY HOPED THEY WOULD...WHICH WAS TO SNUFF OUT THE LIFE OF THE WHEAT....THE WEEDS BECAME FREE KINDLING FOR THE HOUSEHOLDER. PERFECT.

WHAT I’M ALWAYS CURIOUS ABOUT THOUGH IS THE MASTER’S INSTRUCTIONS TO THE SERVANTS THAT THEY ARE NOT TO GET INVOLVED WITH SEPARATING THE WHEAT FROM THE WEEDS. THE MASTER GOES SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT IF THEY EVEN TRY TO DO IT, THEY COULD END UP DAMAGING THE WHEAT. FOLLOWERS OF JESUS COULD ACTUALLY DO HARM TO THE NEW LIFE JESUS IS BRINING INTO THE WORLD IF WE PUT ON OUR GARDEN GLOVES AND HEAD OUT WITH OUR BOTTLES OF ROUNDUP AIMED AND READY, CERTAIN THAT WE KNOW WHAT IS USEFUL TO GOD AND WHAT IS NOT.

TODAY’S PARABLE WARNS US AGAINST RELYING ON OUR HUMAN CAPACITY TO KNOW FULLY THE MIND OF GOD. IT ALSO SUGGESTS THAT WHAT APPEAR TO BE GOOD AND PURE TO US MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY BE EITHER ONE.

MAYBE YOU HAVE KNOWN A PERSON WHO PRESENTED THEMSELVES AS RELIGIOUS, AND, THEN, SOMETHING HAPPENED WHAT REVEALED ANOTHER SIDE. THERE’S A STORY ABOUT AN INCIDENT AT A TRAFFIC LIGHT. A MAN WAS STOPPED, WAITING FOR THE LIGHT TO TURN GREEN. WHEN THE LIGHT CHANGED, THE MAN WAS DISTRACTED AND HE DIDN’T BUDGE. THE WOMAN IN THE CAR BEHIND HIM HONKED HER HORN. HE STILL DIDN’T MOVE. SHE

HONKED AGAIN. BY THIS TIME, SHE WAS POUNDING ON THE STEERING WHEEL AND BLOWING HER HORN NON-STOP. FINALLY, JUST AS THE LIGHT TURNED YELLOW, THE MAN IN THE FIRST CAR WOKE UP AND DROVE THROUGH THE LIGHT. THE WOMAN IN THE SECOND CAR WAS BESIDE HERSELF. STILL MID-RANT AND SWEARING, SHE HEARD A TAP ON HER CAR WINDOW. SHE LOOKED UP TO SEE THE FACE OF A POLICE OFFICER. "LADY, YOU'RE UNDER ARREST," HE SAID. "GET OUT OF THE CAR PLEASE. PUT YOUR HANDS UP." HE TOOK HER TO THE POLICE STATION, HAD HER FINGER PRINTED, PHOTOGRAPHED, AND THEN PUT HER IN A HOLDING CELL. HOURS PASSED. THE OFFICER RETURNED AND UNLOCKED THE CELL DOOR. HE ESCORTED HER BACK TO THE BOOKING DESK. "SORRY FOR THE MISTAKE, MAM," HE SAID. "BUT I PULLED UP BEHIND YOU AS YOU WERE BLOWING YOUR HORN AND CURSING OUT THE FELLOW IN FRONT OF YOU. I NOTICED THE STICKERS ON YOUR BUMPER. ONE READ "FOLLOW ME TO SUNDAY SCHOOL." THE OTHER, "WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?" SO, NATURALLY, I ASSUMED YOU HAD STOLEN THE CAR."

IT MIGHT BE A GOOD THING FOR ALL OF US TO REMEMBER NOT TO WEAR OUR PIETY ON OUR SLEEVES OR OUR BUMPERS. BESIDES, ACCORDING TO TODAY'S PARABLE, THOSE WHO PRESENT THEIR RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR THE WORLD TO SEE AND FEEL SUPERIOR TO EVERYONE ELSE JUST MIGHT END UP PIECES OF KINDLING WHEN ALL IS SAID AND DONE. ONLY GOD KNOWS WHO AND WHAT ARE USEFUL IN THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST.

IT'S OFTEN HARD TO TELL WHO IS WHEAT AND WHO IS WEED. I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT SOMETIME I AM WHEAT AND SOMETIMES I AM WEED, AND I USUALLY DON'T KNOW WHEN I'M BEING EITHER. SOME OF THE THINGS I DO THAT APPEAR TO ME TO BE SO GOOD AND HOLY TURNED OUT TO BE MORE ABOUT ME THAN ABOUT CHRIST, AND THE THINGS I AM NOT EVEN AWARE THAT I'M DOING END UP MAKING A DIFFERENCE. IT'S HARD TO TELL.

PERHAPS IT'S UNDERSTANDABLE THAT THE SERVANTS PUSH FOR CLARITY REGARDING THE WHEAT *VERSUS* THE WEEDS. THEY ARE CONFIDENT THAT, WITHOUT ANY FURTHER DELAY, THEY CAN BRING IN THE HARVEST, BURN THE WEEDS, AND SETTLE FOREVER THE PROBLEM OF WHO IS IN AND WHO IS OUT. BUT THE MASTER HAS GREATER WISDOM SAYING YOU CANNOT TELL ABOUT THESE PLANTS.

THIS PICTURE OF A BLESSED MIXTURE OF WEEDS AND WHEAT GROWING TOGETHER UNTIL HARVEST IS NOT JUST A GLIMPSE OF THE FAITHFUL IN OUR OWN TIME, BUT IS FINALLY A GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE JUDGMENT AT THE END OF TIME AS WE KNOW IT. THE TEXT POINTS US TO A GOD WHO DOES NOT MERELY TOLERATE ENDLESSLY A WORLD THAT IS A MIXTURE OF GOOD AND EVIL, FAITH AND FAITHLESSNESS, TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY, BUT WHO FINALLY, IN GOD'S OWN GOOD TIME, ACTS BOTH TO JUDGE AND TO REDEEM THE WORLD.

BUT UNTIL THAT TIME, JESUS' PARABLE CLEARLY CAUTIONS AGAINST A RUSH TO JUDGMENT. WE CANNOT ALWAYS TELL INITIALLY WHAT IS A GOOD PLANT AND WHAT IS NOT. "JUST LEAVE THE WEEDS ALONE," JESUS SAID. GOD KNOWS WHAT'S GOOD AND WHAT ISN'T.

TOMORROW NIGHT OUR CONGREGATION WILL SERVE THE HARVEST TABLE MEAL TO APPROXIMATELY 100 GUESTS. IT IS A MISSION OF LOVE THAT WAS CREATED IN THE YEAR 2000 AND HAS GROWN IN WAYS UNIMAGINABLE. PRIOR TO OUR FIRST MEAL IN NOVEMBER 2000, I HAD NUMEROUS CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DIRECTOR OF THE BANQUET IN SIOUX FALLS, CAROLYN DOWNS, AND SHE OFFERED WISDOM I HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN. WHEN WE FIRST STARTED THE HARVEST TABLE, THE MEAL WAS SERVED IN THE CHURCH BASEMENT AND CAROLYN WARNED ME THAT ENTERING A CHURCH COULD BE A DRAWBACK FOR SOME GUESTS AS THE CHURCH HAS BEEN A PLACE OF JUDGEMENT AND CRITICISM. WE WERE ENCOURAGED TO HAVE SERVING GROUPS EAT *WITH* THE GUESTS RATHER THAN STAND BACK IN THE KITCHEN *WATCHING* THEM EAT.

OVER THE YEARS I SPENT COUNTLESS MONDAY EVENINGS AT THE HARVEST TABLE BOTH IN THE CHURCH BASEMENT AND EVENTUALLY IN THE NEW COMMUNITY LIFE CENTER AND ALTHOUGH NOT OFTEN, IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON FOR SERVING GROUPS TO VIEW THE GUESTS AS THE WEEDS OF SOCIETY. HOW DO I KNOW? BECAUSE I HEARD THINGS LIKE: "IF THEY CAN AFFORD A CELL PHONE, WHY ARE THEY HERE?" "HOW MANY TIMES DID THAT MAN GO THROUGH THE DESSERT LINE? MAYBE SOMEONE SHOULD TEACH HIM HOW TO EAT BETTER." "WHERE DID THESE PEOPLE COME FROM?" "I'VE NEVER SEEN ANY OF THESE PEOPLE IN BROOKINGS." "I'VE BEEN POURING COFFEE AND WATER ALL NIGHT AND HAVE

YET TO GET A THANK YOU.” “THAT LADY DOESN’T LOOK HUNGRY.” “IF THESE PEOPLE WOULD JUST GET JOBS THERE WOULDN’T BE A NEED FOR FEEDING PROGRAMS LIKE THIS.”

AND THE SADDEST THING....IT WAS OFTEN CHURCH GROUPS MAKING SUCH HATEFUL COMMENTS.

WEEDS. WEEDS. WEEDS. PULL THEM UP. GET RID OF THEM.

BUT I SAY GET TO KNOW THEM BEFORE YOU RUSH TO JUDGEMENT. OVER THE YEARS I HAVE BEEN BLESSED BY FRIENDSHIPS FORMED OVER HARVEST TABLE MEALS. LISTEN, LEARN. EVERY PERSON HAS A STORY AND OFTEN IT IS ONE OF RESILIENCY, PERSERVERANCE AND DEEP FAITH. MANY OF THE GUESTS HAVE BEEN ATTENDING THE HARVEST TABLE FOR OVER 20 YEARS AS IT IS A COMMUNITY.

IT’S NOT OUR JOB..IT NEVER HAS BEEN NOR WILL IT EVER BE..TO DETERMINE WHO IS WITHIN AND WHO IS BEYOND GOD’S LOVE AND ATTENTION. IT IS, HOWEVER, OUR JOB TO WELCOME THE STRANGER, TO SERVE AND LOVE ALL GOD’S CHILDREN.

“JUST LEAVE THE WEEDS ALONE,” JESUS SAID. GOD KNOWS WHAT’S GOOD AND WHAT ISN’T. THE SEEDS OF SALVATION ARE ALIVE AND WELL, GROWING, ALWAYS GROWING IN OUR MIDST AND GOD IS IN CHARGE. THANKS BE TO GOD.