

# Sermon

## Proper 11, Year A

### July 20, 2008

by *The Rev. Norman Bray*

"What we hear with our ears and say with our lips, may we take to our hearts and show forth in our lives, for Christ's sake, Amen."

There is an old saying, its author anonymous, that goes: "There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behooves any of us, to find fault with the rest of us." If you truly understand that little rhyme, if that is the way that you live your lives, then there is no need in you staying to listen to the rest of this sermon, you already have today's message. The rest of us are going to try and work out what it is that God is speaking to us today.

Today's Gospel reading is trying to tell us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like and this parable is usually called "The wheat and the tares" but most modern writer's refer to the "wheat and the weeds" and I don't think that "weeds" is really very helpful for us. When I go out and pull weeds out of the garden I don't see anything that looks like wheat. I see Johnson grass and crown vetch and dollar weed and about forty other kinds of weeds and none of them look like wheat, and without that image this parable was difficult for me to picture in my mind. I had to do a little research to discover that the weed in question is called "darnel" and indeed it does look exactly like wheat until it puts on a head of grain. Until it bears fruit you cannot distinguish it from wheat, alright, now the picture is clear. There is this huge field that has been planted in wheat by the people who serve the Master and then one night, not long after the wheat was planted, the evil one comes and plants darnel, a weed, all among the wheat and no one notices until the plants begin to bear grain. The servants say "Hey boss, should we go and pull the weeds?" The Master says no, leave them alone. We will deal with all of this at harvest time when we harvest the wheat and burn the grain.

The Jesus explains that the good seed, the wheat, is the children of the kingdom, which we suppose means us, as well. The weeds are the children of the evil one and it is the evil one who planted the weeds. At harvest time, angels are going to separate the weeds from the wheat, burning the weeds and the wheat, that's us you know, goes on to shine like the sun in the kingdom of heaven. What a great story! I mean, after all, we get gathered into the kingdom of heaven and the bad people get to go to hell. Has a more satisfying story ever been told? The villain gets punished, the righteous get rewarded, and all is right with the world!

But wait just a moment. Just what is it that the wheat does to deserve such a reward? Who are the servants who wanted to pull the weeds? What did the weeds do, besides just being what God made them? There is more going on here than what is said. It is obvious that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was getting at because they asked him to explain the parable and I think, this is strictly my opinion, and I think that in this case Jesus gave them what they wanted to hear, at least on the surface. But underneath that explanation lies another message, a message that we have heard before, a message that we do not like to hear, and I think that Jesus knew that we would not like this message so he did not lay it out plainly. He made us work for this message, and the message is "Don't Judge!"

Now, that is not a new message for us, we have heard that many times before, but there is more to it than "Don't Judge," there is also the message to "leave it alone." That seems like a strange message for Jesus to leave for us, doesn't it. Aren't we supposed to root out evil wherever we find it? Aren't we supposed to make sure that everyone follows the rules and punish them when they do not? Aren't we supposed to remove the sinners from among us, shun those who are evil? The answer of course is, no, no to every one of those proposals. But wait, that cannot be right, can it? Yes, that is right and the reason is that we cannot discern whether a person is truly evil or just evil at the moment. We are too close to be able to tell the wheat from the weeds and it is possible that what is a weed today may be wheat tomorrow. Paul tells us in **Romans 3:22-25** "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward

as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.” How can we, who are no different from any other sinner, make that distinction? We either cannot tell the difference or our attempts to correct evil become worse than the evil itself. I referred to the Crusades recently and I apologize for bringing them up again so soon, but the First Crusade is such an incredible example of an attempt to correct a perceived evil that turned into something much worse. When the knights and warriors of Christian Europe headed for the Holy Land they had a noble purpose but they lacked critical knowledge. When they entered into battle they killed everyone who wore Arab clothing and had darker skin than theirs. It wasn’t until they started to turn over the dead bodies that they discovered that many wore crosses around their necks. There were Christian Arabs in the Holy Land, there were until the First Crusade. Another example and this one is much more recent. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 the Japanese made a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and killed 2,500 people, mostly military people. It was terrible. We ended the war with atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that killed 250,000 people, mostly civilians, women, children, and the elderly. If Pearl Harbor was terrible, what was Hiroshima and Nagasaki? I am not interested in debating whether World War II was right or not, that is not the point. The point is that when we attempt to right a wrong, our efforts are often perverted by the evil one, by the powers and principalities. Two thousand years ago the Pharisees thought that they were in charge of determining who was good and who was evil. They considered themselves righteous, holy men, doing the will of God and they hung the Son of God on a cross, doing what they knew to be the right thing to do. We should not fool ourselves, we are no better than the Pharisees at determining who is good and who is evil and so what we need to do is be on about the work that God has given us to do; feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of widows and orphans, visit the prisoners, love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. And while we are at it, we might just remember that little rhyme; there is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behooves any of us, to find fault with the rest of us.” Amen.