

Once again, Jesus is teaching the gathered crowd in parables, as good Wisdom teachers did in that day. Later, in private, he "explains" the parable to his closest disciples leaving the crowd to wrestle on their own with his words, even as we do today. the voice of the early church seeking "the" meaning of the parable. Parables are not direct answers to direct questions that we all have and want answered, clearly and specifically. Instead, she says, they deliver "their meaning in images that talk more to our hearts than to our heads. Parables are mysterious...Left alone, they teach us something different every time we hear them, speaking across great distances of time and place and understanding." <sup>1</sup>

Parables are mysterious, as soon as we think we "know" what a parable means, we're probably mistaken. But if we're made uncomfortable by the challenge of a parable, we're probably getting a little closer to the heart of its meaning. Once again, like last week's lectionary reading, this passage contains a parable with images of sowing seeds. Last week's sower liberally spread seeds on every kind of ground, with mixed results. This week's sower presumably uses good ground, but also gets mixed results because of the actions of an enemy.

There's tension and conflict in this week's story, active not passive resistance to the work of God the sower. Perhaps those early Christians had a stronger sense of their own powerlessness, feeling small and vulnerable in opposition to the clearly powerfully wicked forces around them. The parable doesn't address the reason for the enemy's actions. Instead, the focus is on the church's response. The parable could be heard on two levels, our local and our wider realities, that is, the church and the world. What to do about less committed, less faithful, perhaps even trouble-making members of the church?

God forbid that we have sinners in our midst! Never mind all those stories of Jesus eating with sinners, or his words about not judging one another: a religious community, after all, should work for perfection and purity, right? There is a tension between the urge to purge imperfection and the "obligation to accept, forgive, and restore.... the task of judging between good and evil belongs not to us but to Christ."<sup>2</sup> So, who are the weeds? Sometimes it's the frustration of "good" church members who recognize "weeds" in the midst of a church *that ought to be a refuge from the tainted world*: "If God really is in charge, then why isn't the world a beautiful sea of waving grain? Or...couldn't the church, at least, be a neat field of superior wheat?"

Then as now, "however the weeds get there, most of us have got them--not only in our yards but also in our lives: thorny people who were not part of the plan, who are not welcome, sucking up sunlight and water that were meant for good plants, not weeds." <sup>3</sup> This kind of attitude sets up an either/or, Us and Them situation, where some of us are "wheat" and others are "weeds." But who can tell the difference, and who can presume to pull the weeds without harming the tender wheat?

Religious communities, that's who...at least we often presume to do just that.: "Even communities that affirm the radical otherness of God, that claim that God is above and beyond all human distinctions, even such communities assume that, if we must divide Us from Them, God is properly on our side of the

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<sup>1</sup> Learning to Live with Weeds," in *The Seeds of Heaven* Barbara Brown Taylor

<sup>2</sup> (*Preaching through the Christian Year A*)

<sup>3</sup> *Us against Them*

dividing line. After the dirty work is done, and it will be clear that the "Them" in the story will be at fault for the terrible things that have happened to "Us. How often has religion been used to justify violent efforts ("the dirty work") to eliminate perceived "weeds"?

Kermit the Frog may claim that "It's not easy being green," but it's not easy being wheat, either, and having to compete with the weeds for fertile soil. How many people have thought they were doing the Is it possible that the mystery of the parable has something to do with God's timing, and our inability to judge or, for that matter, our unwillingness to trust in God's own judgment? God's judgment, of course, is always better for someone else than it is for us. Still, there is evil and wrongdoing, and surely we are supposed to do *something*. **But no, we should leave the weeds for God to deal with, and "mind our own business, so to speak--our business being the reconciliation of the world through the practice of unshielded love.** If we will give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest.

Thank God, God judges us"--that in the end we won't be the ones who judge ourselves or one another. Still, there is another way to look at this mix of good and evil, and that's to look within ourselves, that we need to remember that we are, ourselves, a mixture of good and evil. Sometimes we are faithful, and sometimes we are not.... Jesus' parable speaks of the burning of the weeds, as was customary in that time when weeds provided fuel for the fires. It's Matthew's way to read fiery judgment into the story. We might see that fire as a purifying of all that "deadens humanity or corrupts God's world. Whatever is in the world, or in us, that poisons our humanity and breaks our relationship with God will, thank the Lord, be burned up in the fires of God's everlasting love." These are strangely, vividly reassuring words, strengthening words, sustaining words for us today just as they were for the very first Christians struggling to survive against the odds.

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the odds against you? Are there conflicts and divisions within your home, your workplace, the church, and "elements" that need to be "removed"? Do you wonder what you're supposed to do about the "evildoers" in the world? Does this parable help?

The difference between a parable and its explanation according to BBT: "A parable washes over you like a wave full of life and light, but an explanation--well, an explanation lets you know where you stand. It gives you something to work with, a tool with which to improve yourself and the condition of the world in general..." ("Learning to Live with Weeds" in *The Seeds of Heaven*).

But how then do we improve the condition of the world? That "practice of unshielded love" may be the key. It's hard to be a faithful Christian, yet we remember that Jesus told us to love our enemies. Jesus also observed that "God sends both sun and rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. If God shows such generosity of spirit, can [we] do any less?" (*New Proclamation Year A 2008*). The question is, can generosity of spirit change the world?

***For further reflection:***

*Jerome, 4th century bishop*

"The words the Lord spoke--'Lest gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them'--leave room for repentance. We are advised not to be quick in cutting off a fellow believer...or a seeker looking to find Jesus."