

SERMON: Growing Together
TEXT: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

July 19, 2020

*I was shocked, confused, bewildered as I entered Heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all, nor the lights or its decor.
But it was the folks in Heaven who made me sputter and gasp—
The thieves, the liars, the sinners, the alcoholics and the trash.
There stood the kid from seventh grade who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor who never said anything nice.
Herb, who I always thought was rotting away in hell,
Was sitting pretty on cloud nine, looking incredibly well.
I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal? I would love to hear your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here? God must've made a mistake.
And why's everyone so quiet, so somber – give me a clue.'*

'Child,' He said, 'they're all in shock. They never thought they'd be seeing you!

This poem, titled, *Heaven's Surprise*, always gives me a chuckle - at first. But it doesn't take long for me to stop laughing when I realize how easily it could apply to me. There are some folks I know whom I might be surprised to see in

heaven someday. And, let's face it, there are probably some who would be surprised to see me in heaven. The poem is funny because it's true.

My second year in seminary I was taking a pastoral care class. One of our first assignments was to visit someone in a hospital or a nursing home and then write a detailed description of the visit - sights, sounds, smells - as well as a verbatim of a specific visit with one of the patients. We were to describe everything, with special attention to our own feelings and reactions. One day, I presented my verbatim to the class, and they were then invited to offer their feedback. One man, whom I didn't know at all, began his critique with this: "I'm sure Ellen has friends, but..." Then he went on with a scathing indictment of my presentation; every piece of what I did and said, even suggesting that my feelings were out of line. Wow. The nicest thing he could say was that I probably had friends! But even then he was giving me the benefit of the doubt!

So, he's probably not expecting to see me in heaven. And frankly, I'd rather not see him!

In today's gospel lesson from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about a homeowner who instructs his workers not to pull the weeds that they have found growing among the wheat. "For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

One commentary I read wrote of the particular weed referred to in the parable. "The bearded darnel is a devil of a weed... Known in biblical terms as *tares*, bearded darnel has no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. Those seeds can cause everything from hallucination to death. No wonder Jesus uses this noxious *cheat weed* to illustrate evil incarnate. Bearded darnel, also known as false wheat, is the botanical equivalent of the *ravenous wolves... in sheep's clothing* of which he has already warned (Matt. 7:15). Moreover, Jesus says, this evil is intentional... Here the enemy deliberately sows cheat weed in a field of good wheat." (Talitha J. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, p.

Intentional, deliberate, destructive, pure evil. This is a lot more serious than my classmate who expressed his clear dislike for me those many years ago. The evil that Jesus is referring to, in our time (and in my opinion) would be crimes like sex trafficking, terrorism, mass shootings, drug companies that promote dangerous and addictive pain killers, child abuse. If only we could rid the world of those who commit these terrible acts! Our lives would be so much easier. Certainly, we could all grow stronger and be so much more productive without these evil forces distracting and disrupting our lives.

The problem is, if the judgment is left up to humans, then there will be those who would describe you or me as the weeds that need to be pulled. This leads to the kind of thinking that makes a person choose to murder his spouse rather than divorce her. If the judgment is left up to humans, then there will be those who determine that an entire race or religion are the weeds that need to be pulled. This leads to the evils of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Evils like the Holocaust. Evils like punishing all Chinese people for the coronavirus pandemic that has upset and changed the world.

One contemporary theologian wrote, “The truth is we are not as good as we think we are at telling the difference between wheat and weed. Our assessments and assumptions are often completely wrong and when we act on them, they are often utterly destructive to the entire ecosystem. Our assumptions about what is wheat and what is weed at best alienate us from one another and at worst kill each other. Jesus tells us to let everything grow until God sorts us out.” (Jill Duffield, *Looking Into the Lectionary*, The Presbyterian Outlook, July 13, 2020)

Christian singer/songwriter Amy Grant has a song that explores the idea of looking for the good in every person. The words of the chorus are as follows:

Cause there's so much good in the worst of us; so much bad in the best of us. It never makes sense for any of us to criticize the rest of us. We'll just find what we're looking for.

“Each of us is some mixture of wheat and weed, of holy and unholy, of potentially fruitful and potentially destructive,” wrote another Biblical scholar. (Gary Peluso-Verdend, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, p. 264) We are all GROWING TOGETHER in God's wheat field.

Have you ever judged someone when you first met them and made assumptions about them before you really got to know them? Then, after having to work with them or share space with them, you discover that your assumptions were wrong?

At First Presbyterian, before we opened the warming center for our homeless neighbors, I think we had certain assumptions about them. At least, I did. I assumed that they could not be trusted. I assumed that they were all addicts or alcoholics or mentally ill, that they had no family, no faith, no respect for others, and were low on intelligence, talent, and skill, and that they chose to live that way. After spending some time with them, I learned that many of my assumptions and judgments were wrong. Those who are addicted wish they could change, and oh, how they've tried. Many have family members and they have complicated relationships with them - just like we have complicated relationships with our family members. Some are talented musicians, artists, creative writers. Some are highly intelligent. They like to talk and laugh and listen to music. They are caring and helpful and respectful. Many are deeply wounded and terribly lonely.

For those of us who have spent time getting to know them, I would say that we have been GROWING TOGETHER, learning about one another, learning about ourselves, and changing our ideas about who are the weeds and who are the wheat.

We must let God do the sorting when the time comes. And until then, may we strive every day to be the best that we can be and assume that others are doing the same. May we grow together in love, in hope, and in faith... to the glory of God!

AMEN.