

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43  
July 17, 2005  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

*Lolium temulentum*.... What's your guess?? A spell from the new Harry Potter book??

Wrong! It's the Latin name for the weeds that show up in today's Gospel parable. People who know about these things identify those weeds as "poisonous bearded darnel," also called "cheat," a look-alike to wheat until the kernel of the grain forms and they can be told apart. The botanist knows that the enemy's sowing of that bad seed goes beyond the category of "prank" or "mischief." It's more like attempted murder. If one mistakes darnel for wheat and eats enough of it, it can cause blindness and even death....

In talking about wheat and weeds growing up side by side, the parable is addressing the **problem**, the **reality** of evil coexisting with good in this world. I guess Jesus' followers couldn't figure out why **everyone** didn't embrace Jesus and His message like they did. Like the rest of the Jews in Israel, they also couldn't figure out why God-fearing Jews and godless Romans had to occupy the same space. And by the time St. Matthew wrote his Gospel, the early Christians were wondering why not even all the followers of the Way were cut out of the same cloth either. They realized there were bad things going on right inside the church and not just outside in the world.

Here's a current example of what looks like wheat and weeds growing together, side by side in the field. A couple months ago Chaplain Mark Farnham came to Holy Trinity to be with our Manasquan Area Ministerium, the local group of pastors, deacons, pastoral associates from the various churches. Mark brought along a power point

presentation of pictures from his ministry as an army chaplain in Kuwait and Iraq last year. A couple of the pictures were of the armed forces hospital in Baghdad, originally built by Saddam Hussein for the medical treatment of his family and friends. As you can imagine, it was a well-appointed facility, but you wouldn't know it from the outside, which is pockmarked from mortar attacks by the insurgents.

Chaplain Farnham described the complicated dynamics of ministering to the intensive care staff, whose patient might include an 18 year old GI from Kansas who had been strafed with bullets, a terrorist who had nearly blown himself up attempting to build a bomb, and an Iraqi child who had run out into the street and been unintentionally struck by one of our Humvees. As you can imagine, it was a bit tougher emotionally for the docs and nurses to care for the bomb-maker than for the child or the U.S. soldier. They were careful to rotate assignments daily, so that responsibilities were shared and shared alike. Everybody cared for everybody, eventually. The wheat and the weeds in this case were **lying, not growing** side by side, and despite nationality or the nature of their injuries, all were patients entrusted to the care of the medical, nursing and pastoral care staff.

Would it have been **simpler** and more **comfortable** for the staff if the terrorist were in a different ward than the others? Sure. But that's not real life in a combat zone. There's **one** intensive care unit. If you **need** intensive care, that's where you end up.

It's that way in most other places, too. Not just in hospitals, but in classrooms, on buses, in the workplace, on the sports field, wheat and weeds also coexist. The conductor on a NJ Transit train doesn't ask all virtuous passengers to sit in a certain car, and doesn't shoo all the apparently shady characters into another. The most honest shopper in a store

doesn't look much different than the most dishonest. The most loving patron in a restaurant can be seated at a table beside the most selfish one.... The world is a fruit basket mix-up of all kinds of people.

Part of the **wisdom**, the **beauty** of this parable, is the reminder that prematurely attempting to separate the wheat from the weeds can be very harmful. Sometimes it's impossible to tell one from another, just like it's tricky to know dandelion from wheat, early on in the growing season. We may **think** we can tell apart wheat and weeds, but do **we** see as **God** sees? We can observe behavior, but can we read the human heart? We **may** know some of what happened in the past, we **may** be aware of what's going on in the present, but do we **really** have a clue about what anyone's future holds? Who are we to say that change is not possible? For someone else – and for ourselves, too.

Just think of some leopards who have changed their spots. What about John, the nineteenth century English sea captain, former slaver who became a man of faith and author of one of the most beloved hymns in the English language? “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see!”

What about St. Paul, formerly “Saul,” the persecutor of Christians who gladly let folks lay their cloaks at his feet while they stoned St. Stephen to death? The very mention of his name made the blood of early Christians run cold, so furiously did he track them down and punish them for their beliefs. It is he, a most unlikely candidate, who became the Apostle to the Gentiles, the author of the majority of letters in the New Testament, one of the most ardent followers and eloquent spokespersons for Jesus Christ in the last two thousand years!

In the last century, Oskar Schindler is an example of a man who would never qualify for canonization, but who evolved from a self-absorbed, self-serving, looking-out-for-number-one mercenary kind of guy into someone who gave his fortune and risked his life to save over a thousand Jews who worked in his factories. Also from that World War II era is the concentration camp guard who once cruelly mistreated Corrie ten Boom and who met her years later and humbly asked her forgiveness....

“If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts”(see *Psalms* 95.7-8). The Good News of the Gospel is that by the amazing grace of God, weeds can **become** wheat. May God’s grace and that insight enable us to be **more** loving and **less** judgmental toward others who for the life of us look like weeds that should be pulled out by the roots and hauled out to the curb for pick-up. May we also be **more** loving and **less** judgmental toward ourselves, because the reality is that there are both wheat and weeds growing in our own hearts, too. Thank heaven, God is patient. Thank heaven, “[N]othing will be impossible with God” (*Luke 1.37*). Who knows? Cared for with compassion, perhaps even the terrorist can leave ICU with the seed of human kindness planted in his heart.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson