



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday, July 19, 2020

Scripture Passages: Genesis 28:10-19 & Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

*+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

So a tough parable for this hot, summer week: something to mull over, lemonade in hand. In fact, parables are tough. I mean, we know what Jesus is doing: in parables Jesus is describing what God's love looks and feels like. He's describing how things are in the Kingdom of God.

But it's not always super clear even though we know his intent. Often Jesus will say, "the kingdom of heaven is like,..." It's like there isn't adequate human language to express to us what the substance and content of God's kingdom is. All our language can do is to get near it – to approximate it – and so he talks in simile and metaphor and sign and symbol.

This morning we heard the 'parable of the wheat and tares' as its known, and we think: What can this mean? I'm ever so glad to hear that the disciples scratched their heads and said – "huh? I don't get it" too. Makes the rest of us feel better!

Parables are from a different time and place with different modes of speech and thought - and some interpretation seems reasonable. But even after the cultural and historical pieces have been parsed a bit, the parables still challenge us – because what they really challenge is human nature. The parables are of God – they are there to show us what God's worldview is, what God's thoughts are, what God's dreams for her people are.

Plus, the parables aren't a product of our culture, . . . there's nothing like them for challenging our comfortable cultural assumptions about who God is, what God wants, and what things like love and success and freedom really are; and they help us to see the richness of God's dreams for the world and for each one of us in it. They're an important way that Jesus speaks to us about that stuff so it's worth it to struggle with them.

But still, this one is tricky.

Weeds sown among the good seed.  
 What can Jesus be getting at?

Well, let me take a bash at it. You have heard me say that scripture always and ever speaks to our lives – the here and now. Our faith and how we live our lives are not separate – they are in fact, inseparable. That’s how come it’s not easy to be a person of faith. I mean if there were no relationship between the two – and say our faith lived in our heads and never made it to our hands and our hearts and our eyes, it’d be an academic exercise wouldn’t it? It needs a joined up approach – head and heart – to make sense to us and to be worth the sacrifices we make for it. I think a parable like this shows us how pragmatic scripture and faith are.

So Jesus says the bad grows with the good. In other words, in life, we rarely get distinctly good or bad situations -- or clearly, unambiguously good or bad people. Sometimes we do – sometimes it’s marvelously and blessedly clear that there is good and there is bad – and we know it when we see it. But most often, our lived experience is that there is a lot of ambiguity: just as many weeds as there is wheat.

We live with ambiguity a lot of the time.

For instance, how often have you asked yourself questions like this:

What is the greater good? Or for that matter: what is the lesser evil?

Will fewer people be hurt if I make this choice or that one?

Is the means as important as the end result? Or do the means in fact, justify the end?

How often have you had to choose the least, worst option and felt compromised no matter what you did?

You see, that battle lives within ourselves. The good and the bad – the wheat and the tare – struggle within us – just about every minute of every day.

Which will win and make the journey to maturity and thrive, or be destroyed?

I’m guessing that the answer lies in where we are rooted.

The lectionary today, just to make sure we get the point about ambiguity and how it lives within us every moment of every day, pairs up Jesus’ parable with the back end of the story of Jacob. Jacob has a dream. God speaks to him And in it the Lord is unbelievably generous to him – tells him he will Father a great nation – his offspring will be like the dust of the earth – all the families of the earth will be blessed in him. God will take care of him and will not leave him. That’s crazy generous.

And it’s even crazier when we consider who Jacob was in scripture. Remember the story of Jacob and Esau? How Jacob tricks Esau and steals his inheritance? Remember how he tried to deceive his uncle Laban?

Stole all the good sheep and both his daughters -- and his household Gods into the bargain? In the story of Jacob's life, it seems like Jacob almost gets away with murder – he never seems to lose despite his sneakiness.

Now Jacob's self-reliance and propensity to deception and trickery, on the face of it make him more weed than wheat – he's an ambiguous character making shady decisions always for his own benefit.

But that characterization is to reckon without God's knowledge and action in our lives. It turns out that Jacob was in fact, good seed, and was rooted more deeply than anyone had known. What turned Jacob around was an encounter with the Lord – one night, he was alone, and getting himself ready to face his brother Esau after many years of bitterness between them. And a man comes to wrestle with Jacob – trying to overpower him. He could not overmaster him, such was Jacob's strength – but he did wound him in the hip. It was a permanent reminder that he had wrestled with God all night. The man (whom Jacob just knew to be God) then re-named him Israel – and Jacob's life took on a new meaning as a result of that wound. You see, God had rooted Jacob's destiny in his dreams. He looked a whole lot like a weed at times with his dishonesty and manipulation and self-centredness – but his life had in fact taken root in God's expectations and vision for what it could be. I imagine Jacob as a head of wheat wrapped around a weed. Pull up one and you lose the good of the other.

Lots of his life was clearly not good. It was not neat. It was not pretty. But the surprising depth of the roots eventually meant that in growth and maturity the good was eventually revealed. And Jacob became Israel, the Father of a great nation.

I love that story, but oh my goodness, it's challenging for those of us who are over here trying hard to be good, unambiguous wheat. We probably need to sit with that for a while and let it sink in and work the change in our thinking. It sits as a great illustration of Jesus' parable. This is the way of our own lives – our own decisions – our own outcomes. Where are we rooted? In God's dreams and possibilities for us? For the truth is, when we join God's mission the possibilities are numerous and endless – like the dust of the earth. Or are we rooted in the limited horizon of fulfilling our own wants?

So the parable of the weeds: challenging, profound, and not at all what we expect. Redemptive too. It certainly fulfills the brief of a parable – to nudge us from what is comfortable or sensible in human terms and lead us to see possibility with God's eyes.

And you know, by listening with ears that hear – really hear that Gospel message, we are given another gift – because we glimpse again who God really is, and what God's dreams are for all God's people, and for the Church of God.

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*