

Sermon: 16-17 July, 2011 St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, Creve Coeur.
The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Heidi Clark

Thank you, readers, for helping tell our stories this morning. It is always interesting to listen to them in community. Over the past few weeks the stories we've read in church include challenges of birthrights, planters of seeds, miracles of abundance, ladders climbing up to heaven, love songs, talk of things hidden, and fleshy discussions about power and choices.

Some of us might read these stories privately and struggle over their meaning. Some of us only truly engaged these stories long ago, when we were children, and still hear them in pastels, and primary colors. But when we grow up, and have a chance to listen to them here in this community, in this particular time of our lives, these stories provide lenses to help us see who we might be called to be, as some of the people of God, working to usher-in God's life, through and among us, today.

I can tell you, as one who has a long-ish view of St. Timothy's stretching back some 15 years, that your life together has been formed by many stories. So before we wander into the field of wheat and weeds found in today's parable, I must tell you something of the story of who you are, as it has been given me these recent weeks.

When I first met with Jack Fleming regarding the community of St. Timothy's, he was bordering on giddiness. My ego wanted to tell me it was because he was talking to me, and maybe I just had that affect on people. But the reality was, it was because he was talking about you.

He arrived with a print-out indicating the types of ministries thriving amongst you. There were names attached to each initiative. As we talked he kept grabbing back the paper and adding names. "Oh, and so-and-so!" and he'd scribble more names, slide it back to me, and within minutes he was pulling it back to himself, hastily adding more names, and declaring "Oh, and this one, she's so interesting. And this man has been a real help..." etc. I won't name names, because I have only 8 minutes, and we still have a parable to get to. But I thought that was so interesting, and so joy-filled. He truly loves you.

So my first day in the office, ready to see the real underbelly of the beast, it turns out that tall Alice, Kathy, Roy, Dean and Peggy were here, and they started doing more of the same. Dragging me out of my office on more than one occasion to show me someone on your long wall of photos, saying "Here is their picture. This is the one I was telling you about. They will really help you." Over and over.

Then you start showing-up. To work on the altar, do some knitting, talk about teenagers, pull some weeds. And without exception your words of greeting to me

have been either “Welcome” or “Congratulations.” Congratulations. I get to be here. And I will really like it. That’s what you keep telling me.

The parish directory I was given by Alice had a few names crossed off with a big marker, and while I dared not venture into who stays on, and who rolls off... it did provide the perfect segue into today’s Gospel. A parable that begins with how the kingdom of heaven is like a person who plants seeds into a field. And it ends with a fiery kind of sorting-out - - of who’s in, who’s not. A sorting I would fear almost as much as Alice’s big pen, crossing-across my entry in the directory.

So, the thing about parables, and we are in the midst of a series of them in our Sunday readings, is that they are a particular kind of teaching. They are messy. They are problematic. Not only do they do not give answers, they contain layers upon layers of possible meaning. And depending on whom you think the merchant, or the farmer, or the traveler represents, they can be dangerous, challenge the status quo and turn the notion of power on its head. I would encourage you to be distrustful of any commentary that implies “the meaning of this parable is clear.” Because that is seldom, if ever, true.

Times change. We grow up. And though the stories are unchanging, it seems as if every time we approach a parable anew, and look around its corners, the players and places have changed. Because we have changed. Like in the parable of the Good Samaritan; I find that sometimes when I hear it I think I am like the outcast, given the chance to do a really good thing, and that is my lens into the story. But sometimes I feel more like I’m the person beaten, and left for dead on the side of the road. When I was preparing to explore this parable with you today, I recognized the players. Farmers, servants, fields. But when the parable ended, and one of those “let me tell you what this parable means” moments followed, it didn’t make sense. We have heard in these recent weeks that Jesus was pretty keen on being ambiguous. That he tells his followers that they might be the only ones to understand his meaning. That some of the truth in his stories will be hidden - - until there comes a time when everyone is ready. So the explanation found in the reading today seems disconnected.

When you read the parable and the explanation together, there is some anxiety. It doesn’t explain why the servants were so worried about the weeds. The planter was not. While weeds in other stories are blamed for choking the good plants, according to some biblical archeologists, the weeds, called tares, in this story turn out to be the kind that don’t harm the wheat, and are useful after harvest for both fuel, and for compost.

So now – if the plants are us - our destiny will be either ground for flour or burned for fuel?

And if that is our choice, then what will become of me? Because according to the explanation that follows the parable, you’re either good, or bad... and I am both. I bring light and good works to the world, and I get distracted by power, stuff, and fear. I have

the capacity to raise myself and others into good lives of discipline, fun, and satisfaction, and I can also choke-out the goodness around me, and wander into the darkness.

Another complication the explanation provided brings-up is that, as Christians, we believe that our sins have been covered. There are no fiery deaths on any of our horizons. Maybe this parable isn't about being burned in the end times, or getting crossed-off of the cosmic parish directory. Maybe it is.

But without wasting any more time getting too distracted by trying to figure out who's in, and who's out, and whether or not we believe any of this stuff about weeping and gnashing of teeth anyway... I want to take us back to the parable itself. It does not say "the kingdom of heaven is like a group of good and bad people squabbling over who is in, and who is out, and casting blame and punishment about while insisting upon their own goodness." That might be what organized religion is about, but that is another sermon.

It begins: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who plants good seed." So the kingdom, which I always hear as "God's life through and among us" is being compared to a person. A planter. And after the weeds and the confusion and the servants' concern, we get back to the planter. The person to whom the kingdom of heaven was compared. And what does this person do? This person says "Bundle some, for use. Gather some, for use." As if to suggest that the kingdom of heaven, God's life through and among us, may be compared to a person who works, and who bundles, and who uses all of God's gifts for the needs of the community.

That is a description I recognize; God's life, through and among us, is like that. That is the kingdom I see here, at St. Timothy's, wandering through the doors every day of the week. I see you, bringing all manner of good wheat and weeds, zucchini and yarn, children and grief, love and service. You bring it here, we pray God's blessing over the lot of it, and we are sent out to plant, again. Sent out to gather, again, and to invite others to do the same.

I am so pleased to be here among you. To join you as you work hard, honestly, and joyfully, and I look forward to being a part of God's life, through and among you, in the months ahead.