

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Sermon for Proper 11, Year A

If there is ever a parable that makes useful to us the faith we hear about, practice, and immerse ourselves in on Sunday morning, this is probably it.

We often hear the question of the relevance of church today. Our adult study class is speaking on this topic, as we are looking at a the dramatic change, which happens every 500 years, in the way people view authority and thus view the position of the church in our world, and we may wonder, will scripture, which is one of the sources of authority we look to in the Episcopal Church, make any sense or shed any light onto our lives?

Well, I believe the parable we heard today is incredibly relevant to each one of us, for it speaks to us about how to live faithfully in normal life, which is full of ambiguity; full of difficult choices, full of complex relationships; full of unending demands upon our time, emotions, energy and values.

This parable, told many years ago, speaks to us of our current reality which is the existence of competing forces: those which work toward (which we could term good) as well as those which work against (which we could term evil) the life force of creativity, restoration, and wholeness, which was instilled in us at our birth, and which Jesus was all about, and to which we as Christians are called to live toward and out of, and to witness to our world.

Our parable reminds us that real life seldom offers such binary choices as good or evil, but rather sets us in both places at the same time and asks us to live in the gap: for we **are** all sinners and yet at the same time, we live in the promise of salvation through Jesus, and as such, we are not all weed, nor are we all wheat. The complexity of our human existence tells we are not a single plant. Rather, we are more like a whole field of wheat and weeds together; of having the potential of being both fruitful and destructive to those around us, and we are indeed a mixture of the holy and unholy, This is true of each of us: none of us is wholly good nor wholly bad. We are the field that contains both the weeds and the wheat.

Because we were made in God's image, within each one of us has been sown the seeds of life, love, goodness, compassion, generosity, empathy, and joy. Also within each one of us, at times, the seeds of jealousy, greed, envy, selfishness, fear, power and control, and resentment have also taken root. This is our human reality the parable speaks to.

The sower planted with good seeds. Yet, there are now weeds strewn among the wheat that puts the ideal harvest the sower had imagined at risk. Ideally, the servants could just rip out the weeds, but the sower knows that to tear out the weeds now risks ruining the maturing wheat as well. And so the sower must wait, living with both the wheat and the weeds until the day of harvest when they may be separated in due time.

The sower must wait, living with both the wheat and the weeds until the day of harvest when they may be separated in due time. How often do we face similar dilemmas when we must sit with conflicting motivations or multiple emotions to let things shake out a bit?

Most of us face a multitude of difficult choices throughout our lives, which often contain mixed motivations, none of them intrinsically evil or good, but ones which are conflicting and take awhile to sort out-like the choice between getting a job to financially support the family or staying at home to spend more time with the family; or between supporting someone who consistently struggles at work and pulls down the quality of your team, or firing that person, which may allow them to find a job better suited to them; or between choosing the best school you've been accepted to or one that is more affordable; or between two different treatment options in response to a grave illness; each of which contain different and painful side-effects and have different probabilities of success. or between giving into peer pressure because it is just plain awful to be left out or choosing to stick to your values and risk isolation; none of these answers is easy. They are all complicated and hard decisions. And our faith to be relevant must help us address these situations.

I hear in this parable Jesus' promise that in ambiguous, challenging situations the certainty we have is that in the end, God will sort things out. Our work is to sit in the in-between and to do this faithfully; we must sit often and closely with God and trust that God will illumine the most faithful choice. And then we will know, and then we will act.

This in-between place, this gap as some would call it, this holy and purposeful ambiguity is not a vague and ungrounded "whatever" kind of ambiguity. It is not an excuse for inaction or for conflict avoidance. But it is an ambiguity that is wise and intentional. It's a time of waiting, discerning, watching, and listening, for the sake of clarity. It's not an excuse to choose comfort over growth, or to be content with our current relationship that isn't right or whole. But it is an open space, created through our patience, where we can be welcomed into a larger reality, where the truth of God can be revealed through our life.

Sitting is hard for us these days, when we seem to be in constant motion and continually bombarded with stimuli from every direction. But the master said, "We will wait until the harvest, we will let them both grow, so we can be clear which ones to rid ourselves of". We will wait until it's clear.

To sit well in patience, to allow God's presence to illumine our choices, requires a steadiness which we can glean from our ancient practices of prayer, study, and the sacraments.

This is how we rid ourselves of the forces against life and wholeness within us, or within our communities, by being attentive to our relationship with God through our prayer life, our study of the scripture, and our participation in the sacraments. This is how we know God, how we enter those "thin places" as Jacob describes in Bethel, when our faith expands beyond our set of beliefs to a living relationship with Christ. Prayer, study, and worship are all tools given to us to combat the force that pulls us away from true living.

When I was serving as an assistant at a church on Long Island, the rector's wife once told me, "When things are going really well, Barbara, that's when the devil is most active. "I must say, I was a bit shocked by this statement. But in light of our parable today, I can interpret it by saying, as we sit and be still before God, as we pray, study, and come to church, as we move toward the wholeness and goodness of God, that's when the seeds of distraction, discontentment, insecurity, and fear – all those things that can pull us away from God, show up. Perhaps it's because the devil is competing against God for our souls, or perhaps it's because when we're closest to God, we are most able to recognize that which is not of God. And we can name and pull out those weeds.

Our parable tells us to stay steady, to wait, to be patient, to immerse ourselves in God, all of which is prayer, so clarity can be revealed.

As one of the early church fathers, St. Benedict says, "The function of prayer is not to establish a routine; it is to establish a relationship with the God who is in relationship with us always. The function of regular times of prayer, then, is not to have us say prayers; it is to enable our lives to become a prayer outside of prayer, to become "pure of heart", one with God, centered in the truth that is the Truth, and the power that is Power and the love that is Love. The function of prayer is to bring us into touch with ourselves, as well: to know our limits, to face our sins, to accept our needs, and to live in hope.

Part of our work, in addition to living our lives faithfully in our times of ambiguity, is to acknowledge that others are as well in that state of holy ambiguity, and to treat them with care. It is not our job to judge others; it is only our job to show forth the fruits of the good seeds, planted deep within us, as best we can, especially to our community; to bear the fruit of love, hope, compassion, generosity, and gratitude, everywhere: in our homes, our work place, our parish, and our world.

For if we bear the fruits of the bad seeds which occasionally take root in our hearts and souls; the fruit of worry, gossip, complaining, grumbling, and judgment, sadly those too will shape our souls, our families, our parish, and our world. As the writer of Matthew's gospel knew only too well, and what makes his words relevant today, is that we do not live in an ideal world, and each week we're faced with a myriad of challenging decisions, some small and others large, to which there is no clear answer. Some decisions we'll get right, others wrong, and still others we won't know whether we were right or wrong for months or years to come. But we still need to make them. And then, each week, no matter how we fared, we can come back to church next Sunday morning, to be reminded that God loves us anyway and promises that, in the end, God will hold all of our choices and all of our lives together in love.

A professor of mine once said, that in a world colored as ours is by ambiguity, the only absolute was to be found in the absolution. I think those are powerful words, and supply one of the main reasons I hope you come to church: because I want you to be able to join with me and others and acknowledge that life is hard, sometimes really hard, and the choices in front of us are not always clear or easy. But not only do we have the support of this community in making these difficult choices, but we can know with certainty that no matter how they turn out we can return on Sunday morning and hear again words of absolution, forgiveness, grace, and commissioning as we are sent once again into the world to make difficult choices and compromises as we try to be the people God has called us to be.

Amen.