

July 19, 2020
Year A Proper 11
Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Bearded Darnel. It's something I'd never heard of until I began working on this sermon, but apparently it's been a part of agricultural frustration since we began cultivating grain. Bearded darnel is a weed that looks a lot like wheat, right up until shortly before harvest. It needs cultivated soil to grow, and its roots interweave with the roots of the wheat, of course, and steal water and nutrients from the grain you're trying to grow. So you don't want to have too much of the darnel in your field. Sometimes darnel is called "cheat." Sometimes it's called "tares," but whatever this weed was called, farmers knew that it wasn't what they were after, because darnel is poisonous, and causes blurred vision, nausea, hallucinations and even death. So in today's gospel, when the enemy sows weeds in the field, he's not just being a pain in the neck, and causing more work for the farmer, he's poisoning the crop, and Jesus' listeners would have known this, in a way that we, who don't really live in an agricultural community like theirs, would not.

The enemy is poisoning the crop. So Jesus' parable is about an enemy who is viciously working, not only to undermine the health of the desired crop, but is deliberately adding poison to it, as well. Even if Jesus hadn't interpreted this parable for the disciples, and explained that the enemy is the devil, and the weeds are the devil's children, we might have been able to figure it out. Because this is a picture of the way the world often is—good and bad mixed together, **both thriving**. I imagine we can all immediately think of situations like this. For instance at work there might be a supervisor who wants to get rid of people who don't support him, so he makes their work environment too toxic to bear. Or maybe you've seen someone who seems to be doing a great job, but they're actually stealing from their employer. And then maybe there is someone whose behavior is blatantly irresponsible and cruel, but those around her are so afraid of her that they refuse to oppose her—and so she continues to get away with it.

It's life, and Jesus saw that in his own community. Remember a few verses before this parable the Pharisees—the church authorities—were working against Jesus, trying to figure out ways to destroy him (Mt. 12:14). It's hard to see the wicked prospering, and an understandable urge is to do what the slaves ask the farmer, "do you want us to go and gather the weeds?" I mean, let's get rid of these people, right? We would be so much better off without them. But the farmer says, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them." At least two things are at play here; the darnel's roots are intertwined with the wheat's, AND most people are a mixture of good and bad. So it's just not that simple for us to get rid of the weeds. The farmer says, "Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at the harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" Jesus says that the harvest represents the end of the age, remember a few months ago we heard about the parousia? That's the time when Jesus will come again, and the reign of peace will begin. Jesus says, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire." So Jesus is saying that we are not to be hasty in judging others in our community,

because 1) we can harm others in trying to get rid of the weeds, and it's not even always easy to tell the weeds from the wheat. And 2) getting rid of the weeds is Jesus's job. He will get rid of "all causes of sin, and all evildoers." He and his angels have the ability to determine what and who that might be. We *often* do not.

For instance, a few months ago we had a patient who was slowly beginning to die. The doctors had tried everything they could think of to save him. He was then on full life support: a ventilator to breathe for him, 24-hour dialysis, because his kidneys had suddenly shut down, three kinds of artificial adrenaline to help his heart to beat, and was getting periodic blood transfusions. None of this was making any difference. His advance directive clearly stated that if he was ever in this condition, he would want to be kept comfortable, and allowed to die in peace, but his wife was entirely against this idea. She threatened to sue the hospital, the doctors—everyone, if we didn't continue to "do everything." Her language to the intensive care doctor was particularly frightening. She said, "if you don't save him, you just better watch your back." The patient's nurse said to me, "stay away from that woman. She is evil." But in talking with her I found her very guarded at first, but then suddenly she opened up and told me about how she felt attacked by the staff, who wanted to let her husband die. She realized that it **was** his wish to go peacefully, but she couldn't imagine living without him. "I'm out of my mind when I think of living without him. He does everything—he makes all the money, pays all the bills, and we've been married since I was sixteen. What do **I** do without him?" She'd been like a wounded, cornered animal, lashing out in fear to save the man she loved, and the only life she knew. Not evil, but terrified. Sometimes it's hard to tell the wheat from the weeds. In that moment what this woman needed was someone to listen, and to support her, so that she could come to terms with her husband's situation. And she needed someone to lament with her. With that support, she was able to make the ethical decision, and honor her husband's wishes.

Really, what I see again and again, is that most of the time, most people are doing the best they can in life. For some people their best is not very good, even on an easy day. For others, like that man's wife, the day might be an especially hard one, and so their best is not that great. We can almost never know what people are going through, and so we are not to condemn. Judgment is Jesus's job.

And please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that we should never expect good behavior. **I'm not saying that we should let people hurt us.** We have the right to expect certain levels of behavior, and communicating our expectations is important. What I'm saying is don't be quick to judge, and don't condemn. Not only does the judgmental attitude poison us, it's not loving. Remember we are to love one another.

We want nice, neat answers, or at least to be able to tell what we should do about things. But Jesus has told us what to do. We are to love God, and love one another. As Christians, we're asked to be in a special relationship with God—to be God's children, and to love God in return for the love that is lavished on us. We do this not because we're afraid we'll be thrown into the fiery furnace if we don't, but because we want to get closer to God *now*. **We want to be the wheat now—not just at harvest.** We want to give people a vision of what the heavenly kingdom can be like when we are in relationship with God. When we show this love, we're also putting *ourselves* in a place where *we* can more easily see God in the world: in the faces of those

whom we help, in our brothers and sisters in Christ, and, sometimes in the face of someone we thought was evil.

Amen

The Rev. Deacon Melanie K. Lewis