

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 23, 2023

The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

+

The Sower Salvage Operation

We may recall from Fr. Turner's sermon last week, Jesus' parable portrait of God as the diligent Sower of seeds, casting potential for growth onto all types of ground. The good soil, of course, but also the rocky ground, the pathways, and in the thorny soil. Ultimately, in that parable, it is, indeed, only the good soil that allows for growth, but you can't say that the gardener didn't try. And one could ask if this is the type of gardener we would want, if we were paying for the seeds. Has he been wasteful or generous? Is he sowing carelessly or carefully? Is this gardener tragically hopeless at his job, or fantastically hopeful, ever willing to reach into his seed bag until the job is done?

Now, remember, Jesus did not preach that parable atop a mountain or in a synagogue, he preached it from a boat just off the shore of the sea of Galilee. The crowd had pressed on him with such intensity that this was the safest place for him to be. And standing on the pebbly beach, the great audience strained to listen to the Parable of the Sower over the gentle waves. As Jesus continued, he introduced another parable, one that could be considered a sequel to the first: a sower, perhaps the same one, planted wheat, this time in good soil, an entire field of it. Everything seemed perfect.

And yet, something horrible takes place in the night. The sower has avoided rocks and careless path trotters. But no matter. There is willful malice out there, too. Something far worse than thorns, a rival gardener! Someone who is intent on doing harm to what would, on its own, thrive.

This enemy sneaks into his field, using the same power of the sower for twisted purposes, scattering weeds among the good crop in the good soil. Not just any weed, but an insidious weed that actually mimics the look of wheat, especially if planted at the same time, growing alongside the crop until it is too late to stop it. This is heartbreak of the parable: God's work has taken root and is growing, and yet that work is threatened because something else has been sown, some other crop, some other purpose has taken root, and that grows too, draining resources, taking up space, undermining the good purposes of the good gardener by co-opting his good soil to frustrate everything.

Now the field hands are keen to pull out this evil presence by the root, to protect the wheat and purify the field. But what does the farmer tell them? On this farm, we aren't going to weed out the weeds. Weeds are no good, of course, but *weeding*? Now? Rooting them out would be so much worse. The roots of the wheat and the tares are so intertwined, since birth. Even if you pull out only the tares, no easy task since they look so similar, the wheat will be pulled out, clod by clod, as well, killing the entire field before it may bear any fruit.

The gardener is not just telling them that their judgment is flawed, but the structure of reality is such that any form of judgment, no matter how precise, will have unforeseeable collateral damage. Above ground, it will look like you are being precise and surgical, but, under the ground, you will destroy untold good in destroying the bad. In seeking to root out evil, you will complete the desire of that evil one who sowed the poison in the night. Or in other words, it is in seeking to destroy the enemy's work, that you unwittingly help your own Enemy. Your zeal is your own destruction

In a world riddled with confusion and frustration and even great evil, the farmer calls his field hands not to decisive uprooting, but to decisive patience. To let things be. To let things grow together until the harvest, when all will be clear, and then all can be sorted out properly.

On the surface, this agricultural and spiritual plan looks so impotent, but at the root, our *letting the weeds be* as they grow, is the only way to participate in the salvage operation of God. And, if it was not already clear, this parable is not just about plants, this is very much about letting *people* be, allowing for, and sometimes even suffering with, the ups and downs of people as they grow. After all, if we were honest with ourselves, sorting people out, rooting out all of those weeds, this is no job for us. Each of us, in our own personal fog, and there is so much to every person that is hidden from us, no matter how we may think otherwise. What is hubris for us, though, isn't for God, from whom no secrets are hid.

Heaven help us if we think we have it all figured out. Because it is not over until it is over. And we don't know the damage we can do, despite meaning well. God does. Jesus does. And this parable tries to pull us away from that seemingly careful, but ultimately careless path. Jesus had other parables for this spiritual folly, noting how hard it is to tell the sheep from the goats, or to pick out the yeast that has been mixed in with the flour. We have our limits. Or perhaps, like the proverbial bull in the chinashop, when it comes to judging others, we don't know our own strength.

Letting be requires so very much of us, for we don't like to have limits. We want to use the gifts we have been given, and make the biggest difference that we can.

It may seem to be a sign of weakness, but our forbearance may be the most powerful thing we do, or, I should say, don't do. Jesus longs for us to give the judgment of others back to God, or as it is portrayed in the parable, back to God's reapers when all is said and done, so that we might not be a blundering obstacle to the truth, but instead be ones who make straight the truth's path with our mercy and our grace, our silence and our trust, linking our lives to the ultimate mercy and grace of God which made this place and our lives.

After all, it is not our judgment, but, instead our mercy which serves to align us with God. The parable of the weeds is a call for patience and forgiveness. And every pardon of ours, every refusal to pull out someone like a weed from this earth, gives us common cause with all those holy spiritual forces who aim for nothing to be lost, who scatter the seed of God on every sort of ground, and look not to the weeding, but to the harvest.

And it is one thing to reckon with this as individuals, but we also reckon with how we live as communities, especially as Christian ones in the here and now at St. Thomas Church, we who have been pursuing this calling together for almost two hundred years. One could say that the parable is presenting us with two visions of parish life for us to consider as we step into the future for another era. On the one hand are the weeding parishes, those wanting to identify, sort out, and burn the weeds. And on the other hand are those parishes who live alongside the weeds, manifesting forgiveness and patience, honoring the fact that on any given day any one of the longest serving members might be a weed, too!

You can tell which vision Jesus prefers. At the same time I recognize how difficult it is. It is a life with a holy logic and wisdom that looks to many like foolishness and naivete. And yet, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, it is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And so it is in this place and this time at St. Thomas, where we find ourselves at our Bicentennial ever expanding beyond these walls into hands and homes around the world, new relationship and connections that we can barely predict, we pray to God for the strength and patience and endurance to live out God's mercy in every field in which we toil, especially this field of St. Thomas which we share. So that as we set our course for the next two hundred years, God the true judge might save us from our judgments, and from fear that overwhelms the better angels of the harvest, giving us the courage to have open doors and open hearts, making room and making way for God to love the world to life.