

Proper 11A 09

Matthew 13-24-30, 36-43

Let's try something a little different this morning. Look around you at the others in the congregation. Take a good look. Who do you think will have the easiest time getting into heaven? Who really lives out their daily lives according to their faith? Who are the really nice people - the obviously Christian people - who take their faith seriously?

Now look around again. Who's going to have a tough time getting into heaven? Can you identify the hypocrites? How about those people who are just plain unpleasant to be around? Or how about those people who come to church either regularly or not but don't seem to have any investment in their claim to the Christian identity?

So if you were God, the first group of folks you've identified would be the good seed sowed in the field of creation; the second group would be the weeds sowed by the Evil One to choke the life out of the good seeds as they grow into healthy plants.

One more time look around. In which group do you belong? Not which group do you want to be in, but which group do you belong in right now?

What are some of the criteria that you used to decide who was in the wheat group? What do you know about the people you picked for that group?

How about the weed group? What were the criteria for those choices? How much do you know about those people?

This parable is the second story about seeds and their viability. It's the first story in Matthew that starts "The Kingdom of God is like..." series of parables. Very simply, this parable tells us that those who distract the good people from their mission as followers of Jesus Christ - those people will be separated out when the time comes for God to make some choices.

We tend to get pre-occupied with who's going to make it into heaven and who's not. Or we say, "Everybody will get into heaven because God is good, God is love, God is all-forgiving." We don't want to think that God might condemn anyone to hell. In conversations about who's going to make it and who's not, we often hear Adolph Hitler brought up. "What if he made a deathbed confession to God? Wouldn't he be forgiven?" Or the other side: "Even if he made a deathbed confession, how could God forgive the slaughter of millions and millions of people?"

This morning in his blog from the Lambeth gathering, Gene Robinson wrote that the Episcopal House of Bishops will be meeting together on Tuesday when the bishops of the other 30+ provinces will also be attending their own meetings. Bishop Robinson will not be allowed to meet with his brothers and sisters because it would look like he's attending the conference. The Archbishop of Canterbury does not want anyone to think Gene is participating in any of the official gatherings of Lambeth because his "manner of life" would make his presence uncomfortable for some bishops. So according to the archbishop's rules,

the Episcopal House of Bishops will meet but they have been told that they cannot invite one of their own - a bishop who has been elected by the people of his diocese according to national and church canons and who has participated in all other House of Bishops meetings.

In the context of today's parable, the Archbishop is culling the weed from the wheat. Gene is the seed planted by the Evil One who is trying to choke out the good and healthy wheat who are the other 600 bishops. Or is he?

Let me read to you a little from Gene's blog entry this morning.

Never have I felt more in need of your prayers. As I write this, the opening service of the Lambeth Conference is going on at Canterbury Cathedral. I am a few miles away -- but it feels like a much further difference. I am not appearing at the opening service, as I promised the Archbishop.

Yesterday was a painful day. I am feeling frustrated and angry. I dare not write too much, because I don't want to sound like I'm whining, nor do I want to say anything intemperate. But making my first trip into Canterbury and the campus on which the Conference is occurring was difficult.

The level of fear and anxiety, especially among the Conference powers-that-be, is out the roof. No matter what I say, no matter what assurances I give, I seem to be regarded as a threat, something to be walled off and kept at a distance. Greeting a few American bishops in passing, and then at a dinner for General Seminary alumni last night, has been pleasant and supportive. But even though I thought I was properly prepared for the feeling of being shut out, I am stunned by the depth of that feeling.

I am not participating in any kind of official way at the "inclusive opening service" being held this afternoon on a green off campus. I will sit in the congregation with those American bishops who choose to show up in support of this service of inclusion. I know that a number of them will be present, even though they'll have just finished a long service at the Cathedral. This means so much to me that they would do so, especially at this time.

The most infuriating blow came this morning with news that when the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops meets on Tuesday afternoon (each of the 38 "national" provinces of the Communion will have its own gathering), I will not be allowed to participate, because this would look like I had become a "participant," and the organizers seem intent on enforcing my status as a non-invitee. If nothing can be done to change this decision, it will be a particularly painful blow. At our House of Bishops meeting in March, I pleaded with the House not to let Lambeth separate us. For me to be excluded from my own House of Bishops seems especially cruel and unnecessary. ...

I don't know how all this is going to play out over the next two weeks. At the moment, I am feeling like the ancient Hebrews, wandering in the desert looking for God's daily manna, just to get through. With all the exclusion and meanness that has come my way over the years, you'd think this would come as less of a surprise. But surprise me it did! And it hurts, especially at the hands of my brothers and sisters in Christ.

So please, pray for me. Pray that God will reveal to me what I am to do and how I am to do it, best reflecting God's love and spirit of reconciliation. Pray that when given an opportunity to speak to one or to many, God might replace my words with His words, my heart with His heart. In the end, I keep reminding myself, I'm going to heaven.

So Gene is on the outside looking in as his "brothers and sisters in Christ" move about the business of the Lambeth conference and plan to meet together on Tuesday. Oh, they try to include him as much as possible and they even visit him when they can. But he doesn't have that coveted purple name badge, so he is kept outside the Episcopal conclave even though he was constitutionally and canonically elected by the people of New Hampshire. The Archbishop of Canterbury decided that this one lone man, Gene

Robinson, was too much of a threat to the other 600+ bishops to include him in this once-every-ten-years meeting. Can you imagine one man having such power? God knows he doesn't want it. But his mere presence causes enough fear and terror in the heart of Rowan Williams to merit a dis-invite to the bishop of New Hampshire. Of course, the bishop of New Hampshire received a request from the archbishop for \$7000 to support those bishops who do not have the financial resources to attend. "No, we don't want you among us but we sure would like it if you sent us \$7000 so other bishops can attend."

Where are the US bishops in all of this? Inside Lambeth with their little purple name tags. Of course they feel bad for their brother and bemoan his absence. But they don't feel bad enough to insist on his presence as a member of the Episcopal Church House of Bishops. They don't feel bad enough to stay away in protest for the way their "brother" is being treated. And they have all kinds of 'legitimate' reasons for their presence in the inner circle. But the fact remains that their behavior, their participation is a quiet but visible indication that Gene is not important enough for them to take a stand.

Next time you're looking for a model of Christian behavior and Christian living, do not look to our bishops. Rather look among ourselves - look among the people in this community who truly live their faith, who are willing to stand up for justice when the institution oppresses one of its own. But do not look to the bishops. What is ironic is that the Archbishop of Nigeria instructed the bishops in his province to not attend Lambeth because one of their own - Martyn Minns - was specifically excluded in the same manner as Gene Robinson. The Archbishop of Nigeria stood up for one of his own, basically saying to the Archbishop of Canterbury, "When you disrespect one of us, you disrespect all of us."

We now know we cannot expect that kind of support and loyalty from the US bishops. They have forgotten Gene Robinson's plea to not let Lambeth drive a wedge between him and his sister and brother bishops. So do not look to our bishops as models of Christian behavior; do not look to them for guidance as we confront some of the more difficult issues of our time. They have forgotten what Jesus said and have sold their souls for tea with the Archbishop of Canterbury. They have forgotten that their complicity with the decision to exclude one of their own ranks right up there with those bishops who have refused to share the Eucharist with our own Presiding Bishop because of her gender. The difference is that she was not physically shut out from the conversation and kept away from the table of the Lord. The complicity of our bishops sends a message to The Episcopal Church that being included in the inner circle of Lambeth is more important than standing with one of their own. Remember this the next time you look to a bishop for guidance.

So this parable of the wheat and weeds tells us that we are not called to judge one another - even as we judge these bishops for their shameful behavior. We can observe their behavior but God alone knows what's in their hearts. God alone knows why they have chosen to agree with the exclusion of their brother. They may have so many reasons and excuses. But will those reasons and excuses stand up to God's judgement as they turn their backs on their brother and walk again into the inner circle with their little purple badges?

Who are the real weeds in this parable? It's time we walk the talk of our faith and insist that our bishops do the same.