

Wheat and Tares

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Sermon for July 17, 2005

Lessons for Pentecost 9 [Proper 11]

Isaiah 44:6-8 (or Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19)

Psalm 86:11-17

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Last year, on **A Prairie Home Companion**, Garrison Keillor talked about how hard it was to form a choir in the Church of the Sanctified Brethren, the mythical denomination in which he grew up. It seemed that every time they got beyond enough members to form a mixed quartet, they'd find some point of Scripture to disagree on, and would split rather than tolerate false doctrine.

He also said that he remembered envying the large choirs of the local Lutheran churches, but he knew it wasn't possible to have that many people singing together without having at least one person, probably a soprano or tenor, guilty of some unconfessed sin, or of not toeing the official line on some theological point.

As I laughed, I realized that he wasn't just talking about the Sanctified Brethren, and he wasn't just talking about fundamentalists, conservatives, and evangelicals either. He was talking about all of us. All of us who assume that we can make ourselves pure and more pleasing to God by separating ourselves from those people and things that we deem to be impure.

He was talking about all of us who have, from time to time, forgotten the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Now, needing to know how to tell the wheat apart from the tares is not simply a reference from an old Bible story. A quick Internet check turned up a 2004 reference to the problems of Persian Darnel, its other name, at the website for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture and Food. And sure enough, just in the parable from Matthew, in its early stages, this fast growing weed mimics the important food crops of the region. But it is only by letting both grow to maturity that farmers can tell the two apart and then properly separate them.

Our problem seems to be that we have either forgotten, or not paid careful attention to this parable, and make two grievous errors as a result. The first is that we assume that it's our job to separate the wheat from the tares. The second is that we assume that we're the wheat.

In our desire to make ourselves pure, as opposed to letting Jesus do that for us, we assume that we are the wheat and that

we're being tainted by the surrounding tares. We assume that we know how to tell wheat from tares, and that it's our job to do the separating, and to do it right now. But clearly Jesus says that this is not the case, "lest the good wheat be pulled up with the tares."

Jesus would rather let the tares grow to maturity so that the heavenly reapers can clearly tell them apart from the wheat. We, however, in our impatience and arrogance, don't mind losing a few grains of wheat if we can be sure of getting rid of most of the tares. It's, as they say in the military, collateral damage. And while collateral damage may be a necessary evil in the world that you and I have to live in right now, it's apparently not the way God chooses to do things.

Jesus says to let the tares grow with the wheat until both are mature and can clearly be told apart. How good are we at telling wheat from tares? Not very, I'm afraid. And it's not even because we're particularly stupid, but instead, because the situations are so complex.

Consider the person who does the right thing for the wrong reason and the one who does the wrong thing for the right reason. Who is the wheat? Who is the tare? Consider two people whose great faith in and love for God lead them to two diametrically opposed positions. Who is the wheat? Who is the tare?

The simple fact of the matter is that it's not that simple. We have neither the tools nor the wisdom to tell the wheat from the tares, and yet, there are some very zealous Christians who feel that they do and that

they're called on to do the weeding now. And if they happen to uproot a few grains of wheat in the process, well, God'll make it better in the long run.

But again, Jesus tells us that it's not our job to do the weeding, and that we'll just mess up the job. He is content to have both wheat and tares live among us until both are mature and can clearly be distinguished from each other.

Does this mean that we are supposed to put up with what seems to be very clear evil? By no means! But if we're serious and honest with ourselves, we'll realize that things aren't always as clear-cut as we'd like to think. I know that I'm a mixture of both selfish and unselfish motives. I know that I'm a mixture of good intentions and horrible execution. And I have no reason to believe that the rest of you are any different than me.

I know that many of the issues that face us in the church are really just the details how we properly care for and love one another. None of us disagrees that we need to do that, but it's in the details where we're all too likely to see a different point of view as representing the tares.

Perhaps also what Jesus is saying here is that there are no quick and easy answers. It takes time to be able to tell the wheat from the tares. And it takes time to see which way of showing love and concern for our neighbor yields the most. Perhaps we have to let that which we are so sure represent the tares grow to maturity, and prepare to be surprised by the result.

But most of all, we need to remember that we are not the reapers. We're the harvest. Perhaps had that been remembered many years ago, the Church of the Sanctified

Brethren might have had a halfway decent choir.