

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 23, 2023

I want you think back to when you were young, to when you were about twenty. (Those of you who are younger than twenty will need to look ahead. Good luck!) Specifically, I want you to try to get inside the mind of that twenty-year old you. What were your hopes? What were your dreams? And most importantly, what kind of person did you want to be?

Many of us at a young age have very idealized ideas of what the future will be. Many of us imagine ourselves having a certain kind of life, a certain type of family, working at a certain job, living in a certain kind of neighborhood and in a certain kind of house. Some of you even know what type of pet or pets you hope to acquire someday. And, of course, most of us envision ourselves as becoming pretty wonderful people. Kind. Loving. Trustworthy. Responsible. Courageous. Forgiving. All sorts of good things. And at that age, we're pretty sure we will be that person, pretty sure that it is firmly within our grasp.

We also often envision that all the "bad" stuff will remain well outside of ourselves. Other people will mess up. Other people will make this world less than it could be. Other people will cause harm and sorrow and pain and disappointment. We won't be the problem. Other people will be. We will be the wheat, not the weeds.

I don't know about you, but I'm not the person I envisioned at age twenty. I haven't lived up to that image of the person I imagined I would become. I'm not as kind, not as loving. I'm not as forgiving or merciful. I'm not as patient or compassionate or understanding. I'm something else. What exactly have I become?

Could it be something negative, no, that's not really possible . . . well, maybe . . . could it be that I've grown into . . . a weed?

That's an unsettling thought. None of us likes to consider the possibility that we're not "one of the good guys", that we are actually part of the problem, that we are (in a sense) choking out the good in this world. And quite honestly, when we look closely at the parable we just heard (one in which Jesus actually gives a kind of "explanation" as to its meaning), it's kind of easy to exclude ourselves from being weeds, being "children of the evil one" as the text describes it.

We're certainly not that, right? Well, yes and no. In one sense, we are not weeds, not those people in concert with the devil who go around trying to spread death and destruction and misery. I think that goes without saying. And so, the story (at face value) probably doesn't make us quite as afraid as it might have had, the wording I want to believe have been softened a little. Most of us (probably all of us) try to be good people, try to do the right thing, try not to live lives contrary to what God wants for us and from us. And, in that sense, we are certainly wheat and not weeds.

But there is another way to understand this parable, one in which we broaden our understanding of the word "world". Might it not also be true that when Jesus tells his disciples that the "field" in his parable is the world, he could just have easily said that the "field" was also something else, something closer to home? Put simply, couldn't Jesus have said that the "field" was also the human heart?

Maybe you feel that I'm taking too many liberties with the text, that I'm reading something into it that's not there. Possibly. And yet, what I'm suggesting is consistent with what we believe in faith. You see, I think there's a kind of danger if we continually see other people as being the problem, if we continually think that we're the "good guys," and if other people were like us, this world would be a much better place. Unfortunately, that's not a good place to be, spiritually.

And at some level, we know that's true. We know that within each of us, the wheat God created us to become has become infiltrated with weeds. We've allowed things to grow within us that God never intended. We've,

at times, given fertile ground to seeds of selfishness and pride and greed not to mention anger. We've listened to voices we should never have listened to and have opened the door to forces and attitudes and thoughts we should never have entertained. And we've become less than we were created to be - fields filled with plenty of wheat, but too many weeds interspersed, choking the life out of us.

And so, when we hear this story, we ultimately shouldn't be thinking about other people. We need to think about what's going on in each of our hearts. Once we acknowledge that, once we are sorry for that, and once we sincerely want to change, we put ourselves in a position for God to do what he so desperately wants to do - allowing him to "burn up" the weeds within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. And in doing so, giving us a new beginning, a fresh start, a clean slate.

Weeds or wheat? Well, probably a lot of one and a little of the other.

Let's leave today focused not on the failings of others, but on our individual failings. And may we open ourselves up to God's mercy and compassion, thereby assuring us that the wheat within each of us can flourish and feed a hungry world.