

**July 17, 2011 — St. Monica's Parish**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**  
***“Weed it and reap!”***

<p><b>Wisdom 12:13, 16-19</b> God is our source of justice, wellspring of mercy and kindness.</p> <p><b>Psalms 86:5-16</b> God does wondrous things for us, acts in kindness, forgiving our sins.</p> <p><b>Romans 8:26-27</b> The Spirit, praying within us, at work within our weakness, knows the will of God.</p> <p><b>Matthew 13:24-43</b> Weeds, seeds, and yeast: metaphors revealing God's kingdom.</p>
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As I approached the readings this week, I began to wonder: “Hmm... another Gospel parable about sowers and seeds.” Why did Jesus tell two such similar stories back-to-back – thereby leaving summer preachers with the challenge of coming up with two different homilies on what seems to be the same topic?

Don't worry – I'm not going to simply read last Sunday's homily all over again! Because the focus of this parable, of weeds sown among the wheat, is in fact quite different from last Sunday's Parable of the Sower. The context, drawn out by the readings that surround it in today's liturgy, is of God's infinite patience, his goodness to us. The reading from Wisdom stresses God's mildness and forbearance, his inclination to spare us and forgive us – as long as we repent and turn from our ways. The Psalm echoes the same message: “Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of steadfast love to all who call upon you.” Paul reminds us in the second reading that in our poverty and weakness, the Spirit comes to our help, works and prays within us.

God is continually giving us, again and again, another chance. Eventually, we need to act on that. For the harvest is coming – and what God wants to see is not weeds, but wheat; not the works of the flesh, but the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, humility, self-control.

How do we distinguish between wheat and weeds, between the harvest God desires to bring about in us and what merely serves our own selfish interests? The answer is not immediately clear. This point is illustrated nicely in a story told by religious educator Kathleen Chesto:

One summer, Kathleen and her husband, having recently moved to a new home in the suburbs, had become just a little too obsessed with having “the perfect lawn”. Careful watering, chemical treatments, pesticides were applied in pursuit of this goal. One day, her 5-year old daughter Mary appeared in the kitchen, a bunch of wilted dandelions in her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks. She wailed: “Daddy’s pulling out all the pretty flowers.” To which her mother replied, almost instinctively: “Those aren’t flowers, dear. Those are weeds.” After a long pause, Mary stared up at her Mother, and asked every 5-year old’s favourite question: “Why?”

Stumped by her daughter’s question, she gave her a hug, sent her out to play, and said she would call her in when she thought of a good answer to her question. A few minutes later, Mary re-appeared at the door, having found the answer to her question. “I know why you call them weeds,” she said. “It’s because they grow where YOU don’t want them to.”

Kathleen realized that her daughter was right to be confused. All along the border of the lawn, she and her husband had planted bright yellow marigolds. To a 5-year old, there isn’t a whole lot of difference between a marigold and a dandelion. Wildflowers grow all over the place, and we pick them and think them beautiful: so why not dandelions? Why are we so quick to label marigolds as “flowers” (and thus good, and beautiful) and dandelions “weeds” (and hence bad, to be uprooted as quickly as possible)? And to what extent do we make these judgments not only about plants, but about people: when they look like we do, think like we do, act as we do, they are “good” – but if they don’t, then they are “bad”, they don’t belong, they need to be uprooted.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus shares three parables with his disciples. Parables reveal to us that God’s ways are not our ways: we should not judge merely by external appearances, but learn to look within, to see the hidden reality of things. Because the people to whom he spoke were an agricultural people, Jesus tells stories about things they could relate to: weeds and seeds, sowing and harvesting, kneading dough and baking bread. The parables of the mustard seed, and of the woman who mixes the yeast in the dough, remind us that small, hidden things can have an impact far beyond their initial appearance.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds, for its part, cautions us against being too hasty in our judgments. How quick we are to label situations, and even people! Have you ever bought something – a book, a mug, a DVD – and struggled to scrape off the price tag or UPC label? They seem to use some kind of space-age adhesive which resists every attempt to soak, scrape, or otherwise remove it. The labels we place on people, once attached, can be just as hard to dislodge. Often, without full knowledge and with no right to do so, we “label” people, groups, situations: good or bad, pretty or ugly, smart or slow, fit or fat, liberal or conservative, normal or abnormal, cool or geek, nerd or jock, freedom fighter or terrorist – the list goes on.

Or think of the way pernicious labels get used in the propaganda machines of oppressive regimes and rebel movements alike. Imagine if Israelis and Palestinians, ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, Hutus and Tutsis, North-Nigerian Muslims and South-Nigerian Christians could enter into serious negotiations which were not predicated on one side being “right” and the other “wrong”, but with both sides acknowledging that within their ranks, both good and bad, both wheat and weeds exist side-by-side? The labels persist, hearts are hardened, and innocent people die.

Once those personal and political labels have become attached in our minds, they tend to stick. We prematurely judge individuals, even entire groups of people, as being somehow beyond hope, beyond redemption, beyond the possibility of change or growth. In so doing, we block their gifts from emerging. We deprive ourselves, our communities, of the gifts we need from them – precisely because they **are** different. None of us likes to be labeled. Yet how often do we – based on a single encounter, or conflict, or a cursory glance – internally label someone, put them inside a little box in our mind: Beggar. Drunk. User. Loser. Crazy. Angry. Lazy. “Different”.

If this is true for the world as a whole, it is also true for us as church. The Church is made up of human persons, of sinners who are called to be saints, and are more or less successful in our attempts to live out our call fully. It’s not fundamentally that some of us are “wheat” to be harvested, and others “weeds” to be burned. In each of us, there is a tremendous capacity for good, but also for evil. Within each of our hearts, throughout human history, wheat and weeds are competing for space, resources, and attention.

In this parable, Jesus points out that it isn't always obvious at first glance which is which: and that if we try too quickly to uproot evil, we can do more harm than good. Whether it's the witch-hunts of McCarthyism or the trials of the Inquisition, it is always dangerous when a self-appointed "morally superior" group takes it upon themselves to weed out all the "dangerous" or "bad" elements from the church, or from society.

It's not that evil does not need to be identified and dealt with. It does. But if we are to do so with any credibility, we must have the courage to first look within, to perform a searching moral inventory on ourselves rather than project onto "society" or "the media" or "the world" or "terrorists" or some other scapegoat the evil we cannot or will not face within.

This parable is not about dichotomies, separating people into neat categories of "good or bad", of "seeds or weeds". It speaks of a God who is infinitely patient with us, who gives us time to grow, who judges us "with mildness and with great forbearance," who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Yes, there will be an accounting, a harvest time, a time of judgment. Yes, within the field which is the human heart, the wheat will be gathered in and the weeds will be sorted out and disposed of appropriately. But our task is not to prematurely label – in others or ourselves – that which is good or evil, wheat or weed. This is the hard work of the discernment of spirits – a task which requires the wisdom, inner knowledge, patience, and perseverance which are ultimately the gift of God. Sometimes that part of yourself you might most quickly characterize as "weed" is precisely where God is going to touch you, and use that to bring fruit in your life and the life of those around you.

So in this summer time of gardening and mowing, of planting and seeding, of weeding and harvesting, let us be attentive to the garden which is our own heart. May God grant us patience and wisdom to carefully discern between the positive and negative influences in our own lives, in this world which God has entrusted to our care. May God lead nations to do the same, resisting the temptation to merely blame and label others, but truly seek the way of justice and peace together, in humility and truth. Having uprooted the **weeds** of prejudice, hatred, and greed, we will be in a position to **reap** the harvest of justice and goodness which is God's desire for all his creation. As the old saying goes: ***"weed it ... and reap!"***