

Adding the Gospel

This week we bring you a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Steve Albertin, whose writing last appeared in this space in [Thursday Theology #782](#).

Steve preached this sermon on July 19-20, on the parable of the wheat and the weeds. He introduced it to us in an e-mail as follows:

It is an example of bringing to Gospel to a text that has none. Many attempts to preach the parable of the Wheat and Weeds end up moralizing, telling the hearers to be tolerant of differences or just to hang in there until God straightens out the mess that is the church—and the world—in the end. Through application of Law and Gospel and Apology 4's daring willingness to "add the Gospel" where there is none, this is what can happen: Christ is magnified and hearers are comforted.

We're glad to share Steve's work with you today.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"WHAT A WAY TO FARM!"
Matthew 13:24-30, 35-43
Lectionary 16 A, Pentecost 6 A
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Christ Church
The Lutheran Church of Zionsville
Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

It hasn't changed much over the centuries. The critics of the church have pretty much always said the same thing. The church is a messy place, filled with hypocrites who are no better than anyone else. Until it cleans up the mess, they will have no part of it.

The church has certainly tried over time to clean up the mess. Sooner or later someone says, "Let's clean up the membership rolls and get rid of the deadwood. It's time to have a congregation of truly committed members. The wishy-washy days are over." However good such intentions might be, they often turn the church into a spiritual Gestapo with everyone spying on each other, judging one another and criticizing those who are not pure enough. There is little toleration of diversity. Everyone is keeping score. Hypocrisy is a way of life. No wonder people want to have no part of a place like that.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells a parable that speaks to a messy church. The parable may not satisfy the critics but it promises to help us who struggle with the mess.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field. However, that night while he slept, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. When the plants came up and bore grain, weeds appeared as well. The servants of the owner came and said to him, "Master, we don't get it. We are sure that you planted only good seed in your field. Where did all these weeds come from?"

The master doesn't blink an eye. "An enemy has done this."

This enemy is very crafty. The Greek text uses the word *zizania* for the type of weed that the enemy sows. *Zizania* when it starts growing looks almost exactly like wheat. It is only when it reaches maturity and it bears no wheat that it is obviously a weed. When the *zizania* matures, the

servants recognize weeds and like any conscientious farmer say, "Then do you want us to go and weed the field and gather up the weeds?"

The master surprisingly says, "No, lest when gathering the weeds, you root up the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. I love to see weeds and wheat grow together. I don't want you accidentally pulling out some of the wheat with the weeds. Just leave it alone. We will straighten it all out in October."

What kind of a farmer is this? This is no way to run a farm!

This sounds like the same farmer that we heard about last week. He also had a rather strange way of farming. In the verses immediately preceding this parable we heard how he went out to sow his seed. We expected him to carefully plow up the ground, mark the rows, place each seed carefully in the furrow, cover them up, then studiously water and weed them. But when the farmer starts to sow, he just flings the seed everywhere. Sure enough, much of the seed falls on the hardened path, among the rocks, in the midst of the thorns, or is snatched up by the birds. What a waste! Most of the seed fails to bring forth anything. What a sloppy farmer! Nevertheless, miraculously—and this is the key to the parable—some of it does find some good soil. There is a huge harvest surpassing everyone's expectations. Wow! What a way to farm! It is certainly not very efficient, but it works.

As if that parable were not confusing enough, Jesus follows it with this parable. Again, there is disaster. There are weeds everywhere. Any sensible and efficient farmer would pull the weeds, but not this one. Let it all go until the harvest. Then he will separate the wheat from the weeds. The weeds will be gathered and burned. The wheat will be stored in his barn. In

the meantime, trust the Master. Let the weeds grow. Live with the mess. Be patient. In the end, God will sort things out.

So, what does this parable say about the church? It is a messy place. Here the wheat and the weeds grow together. It is filled with saints and sinners and we don't know which are which. When we look around, we see those who surely must be weeds. They can't get their kids to behave. They are selfish and petty. They can't control their tongues and think that gossip is a badge of honor. They do not belong here. They ought to be weeded out and asked to leave. That sounds sensible and efficient. Clean this place up and then we will have a church that people will want to join. But Jesus tells us not to pull the weeds. Leave the place a mess because, if we try to clean things up, we will end up doing more harm than good.

What a way to farm!

However, such patience is easier said than done. God has more patience than we do. We can't help ourselves. More often than not, like the farmer's servants, we can't wait to pull the weeds.

In the world, passing judgment, keeping score, evaluating one another—and pulling weeds—is the way to run a farm. Even God wants it that way. We have to make judgments. We have to fire those who do not perform. We have to reward productivity. We have to give people what they deserve. We have to do what is just and fair. That's the way to run a farm, a business, the stock market and the classroom. It's the right thing to do.

However, we do it with a passion that betrays its true source. It is not very pretty. We are afraid. We are afraid that we are not valued. We are afraid that our lives are too messy to measure up. We hunger for the approving smile and thirst for the thumbs-up verdict. And we often do it at the expense of others.

We are quick to criticize, always comparing ourselves to others, always pointing out the mess in everyone else's lives while ignoring the mess in ours. We are jealous, envious, and suspicious. We are quick to condemn those who do not measure up. We want to play God, passing judgment on the worth of those we do not approve. We don't care if some of the wheat gets pulled in the process because all that matters is cleaning up the mess and looking good.

In this parable Jesus reminds us that the final judgment is God's job and not ours. Yet, ever since the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve believed the lie of the serpent, we no longer trust God to sort things out. We are gods thinking we can control our own lives and the lives of others. We get to decide who is good and evil, who is wheat and who is a weed, who is part of the mess and who has got their act cleaned up. However, playing god is dangerous. When we do, we have become the weeds we wanted to root out. You know what happens to the weeds according to Jesus. God doesn't just roll over and forget about it. God will throw them "into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Who then "is righteous and shines like the sun?" Who then can ever hope to endure the day when the "Son of Man will send his angels" to finally gather the weeds and cast them into "the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?" Who then can count on getting a thumbs-up when our lives are still so infested with weeds?

Jesus has pushed us to the edge so that we stop focusing on the mess, the mess in our lives and in the lives of others. Instead, he invites us to turn to him. He has been sent by the Master of the farm to clean up the mess. Just when we thought that we would be cast into the fire, we hear him say to us the same comforting word he said to another weed who hung there beside

him on the cross and thought he was doomed. "Today you will be with me in paradise."

What a way to run a farm! The weeds that deserve to be pulled and cast into the fire, the Master with his strange and wonderful mercy saves. The Master sends his son, Jesus, straight into the mess. Jesus grows among the weeds. He becomes one of us because he is not willing to abandon to us the furnace of fire. He loves all the plants growing in the field, even the weeds. On that dark Friday, he suffers *as* a weed *with* all the weeds of this world. He is cast into the furnace of fire. He cries out weeping and gnashing his teeth, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, why are you treating me like a weed?"

No weed is beyond the reach of God's love. When Jesus is raised, God proves that Jesus' love for weeds was not just Jesus' love but God's love, the Master of the farm. Then we who thought we were weeds surprisingly find ourselves gathered into the barn as wheat, the valued crop of the Master. Every time we gather here around Word and Sacrament, we receive that blessed assurance.

With a future like that, we no longer need to be afraid that we are weeds, worried about where we stand. Therefore, we can be patient. We can withhold judgment and let God clean up the mess at the harvest. We can turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, forgive our enemies and let God be God. We can live with a messy church and messy lives.

St. Paul puts it well in today's Second Reading. Even when the world is a mess, we can hope. When we look around us, all we may see is the mess. But we have been assured that in spite of what we see, we are wheat. Confident of the future, trusting that in the end God will gather us into his barn and not cast us into the fire, we can live with the weeds. We can even love the weeds.

This may be no way to run a farm, but it is the way God runs the farm. Thanks be to God that God does.