Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

24 He put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;25but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.26So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.27And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?”28He answered, “An enemy has done this.” The slaves said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?”29But he replied, “No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.30Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’

36 Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.’37He answered, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man;38the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one,39and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.40Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.41The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers,42and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears\* listen!

Wheat and Weeds

Today’s scripture reading raises so many troubling questions. The questions are troubling because they hover around the concept of judgment, and when we see God in this light, as the judge of all people, the one who determines who will be stored in his barn and who will be cast into the fire, He just doesn’t seem all that warm and loving anymore. To some he actually seems scary. To some He seems ridiculous; an all-loving God could not allow anyone to suffer some eternal punishment. This is one reason among many that some people reject the Christian faith. Others try to understand these scripture verses in some allegorical, symbolic sense. Others, like me, simply accept on faith what is written and confess that we have no answer yet as to why would allow such a place to exist, to allow the eternal suffering of the evildoer.

But what’s interesting about today’s text, and other passages like it, is that they were intended to bring comfort, not fear, consolation, not condemnation to their audience. In both the Old Testament and the New, these “apocalyptic” writings were intended to be read by people who were being persecuted, who were victims of injustice, who were suffering at the hands of the evildoers. Furthermore it was addressed to a community, and not to an gathering of individuals. It’s hard for us to imagine the mindset of the listeners, but the first who heard such end-of-the-world, judgment passages were the Jewish exiles living as house slaves in Babylon. And Jesus’ audience for today’s passage was a persecuted Christian community living under an often ruthless Roman authority and Religious authorities that were insensitive to the plight of the common people. These passages were in essence telling these communities, “Don’t worry. God will rescue you. Injustice will not go unpunished, but God, who is judge of all, will have the last word.” And the audience would not have questioned how they would be judged; they were the wheat. They were on the right side of the pearly gates. They were the ones who were now suffering and patiently waiting for their liberation, their *salvation.*

From this perspective, the meaning of today’s scripture becomes clear: don’t judge, because we can’t. You and I can’t distinguish between wheat and weed. In the Middle East, there is a weed called “bearded darnel,” or “bastard wheat.” It looked almost identical to wheat as it grew. What’s more is that its roots would intertwine with the roots of the wheat, making it nearly impossible to separate without killing the wheat. So the farmer would have to allow the darnel to grow along with the wheat until harvest time. By then you could tell the difference as the darnel “ears” would stick up while the ears of wheat would droop. Until harvest time, the wheat and the weed are nearly indistinguishable. So while the wheat knows that it’s wheat, we cannot judge others to be either wheat or weeds. Only Christ can do that at harvest time. It can be tempting, in our state of spiritual immaturity, to distinguish ourselves from the weeds, to try to discern, by another’s actions or statements or lifestyle, or religion. Today’s lesson tells us that we cannot look at a Muslim or an Atheist or a Tea Party Republican or a Socialist and say “you’re not from the right seed.” It’s not our task to do the weeding. We simply need to grow healthy in Christ, amidst both wheat and weeds, to bear good fruit (or grain), and to be gathered into the kingdom of God when harvest time comes. God’s justice will be done, rest assured.

And there’s very good reason that we shouldn’t be weeding. God, in his own time, determines when we bear fruit. The world is full of folks who spent years on the wrong path then came to the light. Jacob was one example – a guy who lied, and cheated and stole. He lived a life that didn’t even acknowledge God’s presence, yet God came to him in one of his darkest hours and assured him that he was blessed. People who knew Jacob might have wondered, “God, what do you see in this guy?” Only God could know that Jacob would come to know and love him. The apostle Paul is another prime example – someone who spent years persecuting the Church before he “saw the light.” It may have been the Christian communities recollection of this parable that prevented the Church from rejecting Paul as a “weed,” someone who couldn’t possibly be among God’s people. Our job, as the Church, is to bear fruit, or wheat, to act as God’s instruments in helping them come to know God and to bear fruit, or wheat. Today we will be baptizing Jason Jr., and he and his parents can find comfort in knowing that we will never, ever, prejudge him; our job is to love him regardless of what twists and turns his spiritual journey takes. Christ alone will be the judge.

But let’s move back to the first observation, that twenty-first century Americans, even God-fearing Christians, feel so uncomfortable with today’s text. Let me suggest that the reason so many are uncomfortable is that we don’t see ourselves as the persecuted community in need of salvation, and perhaps we may even see ourselves in the seat of the oppressor. I don’t mean that we’re overt evildoers – or at least we don’t put that on our resumes. But while we can all point our fingers at the people on the far extreme of evil, people who commit horrible crimes against others, the further we move away from that extreme, the more our fingers point at ourselves. We may advocate justice, but if our material desires overwhelm us we can easily close our eyes to the injustices that transpire in the manufacturing of that item we so desire. What we don’t know can’t hurt us…or can it?

That may be what makes us so uncomfortable with today’s text, and while the author would never have guessed that a twenty-first American church would see this text the way we see it, I believe the author would have said “hallelujah” because it has such an effect on us. It makes us question our righteousness. It makes us examine our own actions in the light of God’s judgment. And it can make us fear God, or rather our standing with God. Are we wheat, to be harvested and brought into God’s kingdom, or weeds who will be discarded, cast into a fire like other debris?

If you’re among those who feel uncertain because of today’s text, I have good news for you. I have the answer. Not that *I* can tell you if you are wheat or a weed – it’s clear from this parable that only God can tell. But the good news is that God can tell you. All you have to do is ask. That seems like such a hard task for some. It’s like they’re not sure whether or not they’ll allowed into a party at God’s house, and they spend all their life trying to make themselves look as good as possible, hiding those embarrassing blemishes, trying to iron out all the wrinkles, polishing their teeth, and waiting for the judgment day when they come to the door of God’s house, hoping that God will let them in, only to hear God say, “I sent you an invitation years ago. The party’s been going on forever. Why didn’t you come sooner?” They’re afraid to ask because they know, in their heart, that if they were God, they would not invite them to their party. It’s like that Groucho Marx line: “I would never belong to a club that had me as a member.” We often are our own harshest judge, and so we try in vain to meet our own standards before life ends. We don’t think about just going to God as we are and asking him, “am I wheat? Am I part of your kingdom? Can I come to the party?”

If we just come to Christ, as we are, with our faults, our sins, our hang-ups, our fears and our doubts, but we just come to him, he’s not going to turn us away. The trick is to come to him. We can come up with millions of reasons not to, but there is only one person who can tell you if you are wheat and not weed, who can reassure you that you are among the saved, that however imperfect you may be, you have long-term spiritual health coverage with Christ. But unless you go to him, you will never know. And no one else will be able to put your heart to rest – because no one else can distinguish the wheat from the weeds. So I encourage you to seek the assurance that only Christ can give you, then come here, or to another church, where we can celebrate our wheat-hood together.