

The Wheat and the Tares; Proper 11 Yr A Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Dale Ramerman; July 23, 2017

In the mid-1950's, when I was starting high school, we attended a church that was part of a small denomination that had split from the main presbyterian church during the civil war. About 1955 the two denominations voted to merge. Our pastor, however, was adamantly opposed because the larger denomination did not believe the right doctrines. But I was skeptical. The Bible passages I heard read did not seem to me to be entirely consistent, and I wondered what "right belief" really was. Moreover, I knew church doctrines were not all agreed upon, even in our small church.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew was probably written after the Roman-Jewish wars of 66-70 which resulted in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the end of the traditional organizational structure of Judaism. And it is widely believed by that Gospel of Matthew was written by an educated, Greek speaking Jew who was a part of a Christian community, perhaps located in Antioch in modern day Turkey. Writing 30 or 40 years after the death of Christ, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew was intensely concerned about what shapes and what maintains a Christian community faith.

Our Gospel reading for today is a parable which, in literary terms, we would describe as an allegory. An allegory is a story with a secret meaning that can be understood only with that secret meaning. So in our reading, Jesus explains the parable by telling the disciples the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, which is the term Jesus uses to refer to himself; the field where the seed is spread is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and so on.

But why was this parable included by Matthew when many other parables of Jesus were not. I suggest that Matthew included this parable in his gospel because of the challenges his community of faith, (and probably every community whether religious or secular) was facing: what does a community do when members don't believe the "right things", or don't follow the Community's rules of conduct, or want to change the rules of the community, or don't defer to church leadership?

This has been an issue throughout the history of the Church, and there is no reason to think it was not a concern in Matthew's very early Christian community. Should the church, when challenged by insiders, reform itself or adhere to what they have always believed? Parts of the church did that in a big way 500 years ago, in what we now call the Reformation, with the result that believing the right thing become an important emphasis. While much can be said positively about the reformation, it did create a major split in the church and innumerable offshoots for offshoots ever since.

More than 100 years ago in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States there was a strong emphasis on right belief which developed into what became called known as fundamentalism. The idea was that to be a Christian one had to believe in the truth of the basic fundamentals of the Christian church. There are many lists of those fundamentals, but this is what someone said were the five things a Christian must believe:

- The Bible is inspired by God and thus is infallible
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Christ's death as a substitutionary atonement for our sins
- Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead
- The miracles depicted in scripture in fact happened just as written

What became known as the fundamentalist movement has resulted in more divisions within individual church communities, and within church denominations ever since. The church I was raised in split off over this very question.

But what about members who don't believe what the church propounds. Should they be tolerated or booted out? There has been a long history of kicking them out to purify the church, or of splitting the church to form a more "pure" version.

What lessons would we draw if we read Jesus' parable of the weeds growing with the wheat as a guide for maintaining a community of faith? Jesus says that to pull out the weeds while the wheat is still growing will destroy the field of wheat because the weeds are entangled with the wheat. Better to wait until harvest and then separate the wheat from the weeds. Perhaps this understanding of the parable is the reason Matthew included it in his gospel. Dissent within a community of faith may be costly. It drains the energy of a church community and undercuts morale. But isn't that inherent in the church as a human institution, a necessary cost of being a community that struggles together to understand what our Scriptures mean how they should be applied, and strives to discern what the Spirit is calling us to do while welcoming everyone and spreading the good news of Christ to everyone within our reach? Feelings of righteous indignation from "purifying" the church, or forming a a new purer church, may not be Jesus' value.

Matthew puts considerable emphasis on a coming final judgment, as we will hear in the readings from Matthew between now and Advent. I suggest that today's reading is a warning to the church not to confuse maintaining the church (ecclesiology) which we do have some responsibility for, with Eschatology, the study of the end times, the final judgment and Jesus' promised return, which is God's responsibility and not ours.

Pulling out the weeds before harvest destroys the crop. But letting the weeds grow also has costs: slower growth of the wheat and smaller harvest, and the extra labor expended to separate out the wheat kernels. And the same is true in a community of faith. Welcoming everyone also has challenges and costs.

Being the church is not easy. But its blessings are immeasurable.

May it ever be so.

Anacortes, Christ Episcopal Church, 7/23/17