

# The Wheat and the Weeds

Sermon June 22, 2008

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Good morning! When I'm away on vacation for three Sundays I know how much I appreciate St. James' because (after a while) I miss you!

It's good to be back especially this morning, as we join with Anglican church people around the world who are sharing spiritually with 600 Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference who are marching together today in London in witness to their support of the Millennium Development Goals. It's good that we're sharing in this at St. James' this morning because, over a year after our first vestry resolution supporting these goals at St. James' and mounting eight banners on the wall back of you displaying these goals, we need to recall what all this means.

First, we need to remind ourselves of the difference between relief of people in "emergencies"—immediate response to suffering and loss from floods along the Mississippi or Malaria in an African country-- and "development" which has to do with changing the systems which have caused the trouble in the first place. When a man is hungry you can feed him a fish and deal with the emergency relief of hunger, but if you teach a man to fish, that's development, and the man has a whole life in front of him. When a child in Africa has malaria you can treat the child in that emergency, but when you invest in mosquito nets that's development in dealing with the basic source of infection. It's a marvelous difference.

This morning in a space of less than fifteen minutes you're going to get two sermons! They're both about Jesus' parables about seeds and, like all Jesus' parables, they're both about real life.

This first sermon is about the MDG's and the text is the parable of the mustard seed (actually in our Gospel for next Sunday.)

The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds but it grows into a shrub and becomes a tree. That's the way that your gifts for the Millennium Development goals grow, and keep on growing, in parts of the world, like Africa, where—like the mustard seeds—we often don't see them.

That's the end of my first sermon, and here's the second one, on another of the five parables on seeds in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus taught eternal truths about life by using illustrations and particularly parable stories that his audience could understand and relate to. The crowds that gathered to hear Jesus were people who knew about farming, so it made sense that he would tell stories about planting seeds.

I remember my grandmother used to say, “You have to take the good with the bad” or maybe it was “you just have to take the bad with the good.” Anyway, this morning our Gospel parable and this second sermon are about the farmer who plants seeds to grow wheat, but when the blooms come up, there are weeds as well as wheat!

Now, do we city dwellers and suburbanites know much about weeds? I drive twelve miles from my apartment on beautiful Cathedral Avenue in the District, near the beautiful well-watered grounds of the National Cathedral into the attractive suburban neighborhood of St. James’ with its well-watered lawns of green grass. I haven’t seen a dandelion for a long time. Everyone uses products that supposedly do no harm to the environment and insure we don’t have dandelions. If we do see any dandelions, we may even encourage the neighborhood dandelion police to search out the culprits and at least try to shame them!

Like it is with dandelions we always expect to make progress in improving our lives—be it raising children, dealing with aging parents, coping with some conflict at work, or balancing time and check books against all the choices we have in life, because, as they say “progress is our most important product.”

Yes, we’ve all thought that way, but in many ways that was before 9/11, when ordinary life became no longer ordinary, and garden-variety obsessions faded down on our priority lists and were replaced by fear of terrorism. Now in the most recent polls even terrorism has taken a backseat to the economy in the listing of our most anxiety-producing concerns. All that seems to assume that we can always expect to live lives preoccupied by fear of something or someone. That can eventually cultivate in our hearts and souls the seeds of retribution—bomb the enemy! throw the bums out of congress and the supreme court! Get your money out of the bank while you can! Don’t play with those new kids!

No, it doesn’t seem like a good time for hope, for reason, for patience to allow both wheat and weeds to grow together—despite Jesus’ admonition in the Gospel today that this is what we should do. There are many voices clamoring for the bad to be punished, weeded out or destroyed immediately.

Governments, and sometimes even Christian Churches, think they can control human behavior by establishing codes and passing laws. Certainly in the fervor of presidential campaigns supporters of the candidates, and radio talk show hosts, are likely to exploit the good guy and bad guy stereotypes to get our attention.

Happily, at least for now, I think both Barack Obama and John McCain have been careful about doing that. They have not aligned themselves with those who see everything as, in old cultural terms “black” and “white”, clearly good or clearly bad. Hopefully they are realistic enough to perceive that we are all trying to live in a murky world where clear choices are not always visible. I happen to believe as an Episcopalian that reason and experience, joined with scripture, provide a strong basis for living in this ambiguous gray world, but mainline Christians can’t pretend we have that truth and

others don't. It's a new religious landscape out there and Evangelical Christians such as Rick Warren and Brian McLaren are taking similar paths of a social gospel, moving away from the Jerry Falwell and Pat Robinson more fundamental religious stereotypes of another era.

In our search for direction in this complex world where the wheat and the weeds grow together, labeling and stereotypes don't help enough. Like Pogo in the cartoon strip, we have to say that "we have met the enemy and he is us" You and I are the ones "standing in the need of prayer."

I don't know about you, but I find it hard to decide who is really pure and good in the eyes of God and who isn't. About myself, I certainly have trouble. Some days I'm wheat and some days I'm weed, and I can hardly tell the difference. When I think I'm serving God most faithfully it turns out that I'm really interested in myself. And those things that I don't even know are useful to God can sometimes end up making the difference. Do you feel the same way?

C.S. Lewis in his "Screwtape Letters" wrote that the greatest achievement of the devil is to convince us that there isn't one! Perhaps the most destructive ploy of the devil—or however you want to name evil—has been to make us forget that we are not self-sufficient, that we belong to the God who created us and has compassion for us. There may be satisfactory weed-killers for dandelions, but there isn't one for the weeds that grow in our hearts and souls.

Certainly depending on human power alone will not save us. Someday we may indeed catch Bin Laden and his cohorts and bring them to justice, someday we may steady the economic seas that are roiling around us, but all this will not eliminate the seeds of greed and global terrorism still growing in our broken world. Only God can heal the wounds of a fallen creation, and bring about harmony and justice among the peoples of the world.

There will ultimately be judgment all right, but it is God, and God alone who will do the judging. As Paul says in his letter we heard today, "it is only in hope that we are saved." In the meantime we are called to be faithful to our calling, in prayer and in action. While we should not be politically naïve, or unprepared in the world's political and military arena, neither are we to practice vengeance or hatred toward our neighbors near or far. As much as we say we believe in it, humility has never been a characteristic we have learned very well. But in the complicated gray world God has given us to live in, however, where weeds and wheat grow alongside each other, I suggest that humility is a requirement for us all.

AMEN