Proper 11 A Matthew 13: 24-30

Matthew is a pragmatist who consistently deals with practical human problems and situations.

We might cringe from time to time with what the text says, but we cannot argue that Matthew is abstract or that he avoids every day down to earth issues.

Such is the case with today's reading, a matter of field and seed, of farm workers and a boss, of weeds in the rows of golden wheat.

Liking things rather black and white, Matthew is an either/or rather than a both/and writer.

You are either a wise or a foolish virgin, you are sheep or goats, good or bad – he wants thing clear cut, where people are faithful or wicked, blessed or cursed.

Maybe he had this desire for simple clarity in common with at least some of his readers, and you can see it in the way Matthew constructs the verses in the gospel for today.

One version of the parable is told to the crowds, the outsiders, and another version with interpretation to the insiders, the disciples themselves. And here is Matthew once again discriminating between the insiders and outsiders, between those with ears to hear and those without.

To the insiders the message is clear: Never mind that there seems to be a lot of weeds in the world right now. Hang in there. Be patient. The last day will come when the wheat will be valued and the weeds will go up in a puff of smoke.

This good guy/bad guy scenario appears too simple doesn't it?

There is an implied clarity here that I think escapes most of us. We encounter both kinds, weeds and wheat, in ourselves, and in our neighbors, and in the world.

The fields of this world, literally and figuratively, are full of mixed plantings. I have had some fields where I could not find either wheat or weeds. They had grown together so long and well that an imagined hybrid was more likely to be found.

So, remembering the results of my horticultural stewardship, this business of gathering and burning the weeds tends to make me a wee bit uncomfortable.
Which am I? Wheat or weeds? Blessed or cursed?

The fortunate thing about parables is that they rarely answer such questions, or at least not directly. As much as we want to read them like some kind of precise Morse code, they act more like dreams or poems, and bring images that talk more to our hearts than our heads.
So maybe it was the desire of Matthew and his community for some clear unmistakable writings on the wall – maybe the discomfort of ambiguity - that made them decide not to leave the parable well enough alone, but to provide the explanatory re-telling found in the final verses of our lesson.

Not that it matters very much at all, except to remind us how much we love explanations, which are after all so much easier than mysteries.

According to Jesus, not even the kingdom of heaven is pure wheat. Maybe it was in the beginning, but sometime during the dead of the night an enemy sneaked in and sowed weeds among the wheat, tares, or darnel, to be exact, if you know your weeds. And these nasty rascals are a wheat look-a -like, hiding out in the wheat with poisonous seeds and roots like nylon cords, even causing blindness and possibly death if a lot of the seeds find their way into the bread dough.
We know that weeds do not require some agrarian terrorist to get planted. They have a way of growing all by themselves, unbidden, unassisted. We do not need some conspiracy theory like a foreign enemy to explain their noxious presence. So maybe the boss here is a little paranoid when you think about it. How many of us assume that the weeds in our yards are the work of our enemies?

However the weeds get there, most of us have got them – not only in our yards but also in our lives:
Thorny people, reactionary people, dominating people, people who are not part of our neat plans, who are not welcome, with different opinions, values, or behaviors.
They take up all of the oxygen, suck up the sunlight and water that were mean for the good plants, not for weeds.

Some are just annoying or possibly irritating, like nettles or poison oak, but some are as deadly as nightshade. So what do we do about them?

It is assumed that Palestinian farmers uprooted the darnel several times prior to the harvesting to avoid the messy separation process and not take an unnecessary risk by letting the weeds and the wheat grow together.

"Do you want us to go and gather them?" the slaves ask their master.
Sounds like common sense to me. Cleanse the field. Pull them up. Cast them out. It is risky to let them grow together.
And haven't we seen a lot of that: from Urban Renewal in the 60's to the Middle East, from Rwanda and Bosnia to the Sudan, with South Africa and Northern Ireland thrown in for good measure. Cleanse the field!

Wherever we try to purify the field by hostile means, we are standing with the slaves in our parable, doing what they wanted to do.
"No," said the householder. Not on your life will you do that. *"For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at the 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."*

This is quite an amazing statement, if only because of the implications that we should willingly co-exist with evil!
As one commentator says, it also seems to suggest that we can do more harm when we think we are doing good then when we are doing nothing at all.

When I look at this parable I see at least three reasons why the landholder says no to those who want to clean up the field by pulling the weeds.
FIRST, they are not talented enough to tell the difference between a good plant and a bad one. I think I could rest the entire case here by reference to those first sowers of Kudzu all over the South!

No doubt nearly all of us have had the experience of uprooting the raspberries by mistake or taking care of something that later turns out to be a thorny thistle.
We can pull up something that looks for all the world like a weed to find innocent grains of wheat left in our hands.

In one of the first Crusades some European knights rampaged through an Arab town on their way to the Holy Land and killed everyone in sight.
Later they found as they turned the bodies over that most of them were wearing crosses around their necks. It had not dawned on them that Christians could have brown faces.
Often quick to judge, we seem sure that we can tell the difference between good seed and bad, but that is seldom the case.

Another difficulty in separating the good from the bad is that often their lives are intertwined. That is one of the ways darnel survives, in fact, by wrapping it roots around the roots of the wheat so that you cannot yank up one without yanking up the other.
According to the Master of the household it is just not worth it. Better to let them all grow together until it is time to harvest.

Apparently, he doesn't share our appetite for a pristine crop, a neat field, an efficient operation. It looks like growth interests the landowner more than perfection. And after all, he does own the field.

SECOND: Let the weeds grow. They may turn out to be useful in the end.
In first-century Palestine fuel was hard to come by. The best bet for heating and cooking was dried weeds or manure. Allowing the wheat and the weeds to grow together one ended up with weeds for the oven and wheat for the flower. The only other things needed were some patience and then tolerance of the temporary messy field.
But living faithfully in this time before the harvest, takes an amount of patience that is hard to come by, however useful the weeds may be in ways that surpass our understanding.

Most of us have heard of some incidence where some bad seed was let loose in a community, and if resulting not in a tragedy, at least a jarring of all, has resulted in a coming together of people as never before, to do something about how to survive despite the noxious weeds.

There are even times when the weeds wake up the wheat and remind them who they are. When the field gets very, very messy, it might dawn on the wheat how necessary for survival it is to remember who the Sower is, to not take things for granted, to conclude that it will take effort to survive.

How then shall the wheat survive? By attacking the weeds, or by using the same resources and devoting them to being wheat?

THIRD: the wheat run the risk of turning into weeds themselves. It is one of the wiliest things weeds do, to get the wheat so riled up and threatened that they start acting like weeds themselves – full of prickles and poison – being good ones who turn into bad ones trying to put the bad ones out of action.

The Master of the field has warned about that before:

> *You have heard that it was said to you, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer....Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

I believe the heart of this parable is about the field – about the collective experience - the collective experience of the whole world; or a whole congregation or community; or a whole family or a whole person.

God permits a mixed field, in other words, and whether it is to our liking or meets with our approval or if we understand it – God asks us to live in that mixed field – both in the church and in the world, and in our families and with ourselves.

Rather than a call to passivity it is a call to what at times is strenuous activity.

For it is not easy being wheat with all those weeds competing for the nutrients of the soil.

But what the Landowner knows is that the best and only real solution to thorny evil in us, around us and in the world is to bear good fruit, be fully wheat, nevertheless.

Our job in this mixed field is not to expend our energy in destroying weeds but to make the main thing the main thing, so to speak. To be taking care of business!

And our business is the reconciliation of the world to God through the practice of unshielded love.

If we give ourselves to that God will take care of the rest – the nutrients – the nutrients, the rain, the reapers, the harvest, the fire, the bread, the table – all of it. Our job is simply and profoundly to be wheat, even in a messy field – to go on bearing witness to the One who planted us among those, who at least for now, seem to have been planted by someone else.