

# A THREAD OF HOPE AND THE PRE-SEASON OF GRACE

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, JULY 17, 2005

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Assigned Texts, Pentecost IX, Year 'A' Proper 11

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Romans 8:18-25

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And 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?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let 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.'" 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." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen! Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

## Prelude

Here's a helpful little tip for our younger listeners this morning. How many of us older types had to pull weeds back home when we were kids? Quite a few, huh? And how many of us tried arguing with our parents with the feeble line, "Who's to say what's a weed, and what's a beautiful flower?" Okay, a few of us more clever types. And how many of us were successful with our futile ploy? I didn't think so. Still, what to do with the weeds amongst us?

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

A parish member sends me this article for my possible amusement:

Reuters News Service, Los Angeles -- A modern-day Jesus is coming to prime-time television. Eager to discover a new smash hit in an attempt to reverse a ratings slump, NBC has chosen to give a try at a new drama mid-season next year titled "The Book of Daniel," in which Christ is depicted as a contemporary confidant to an Episcopal priest.

I can hardly wait ...

The series is to star Aidan Quinn as a conflicted, pill-popping minister by the name of the Rev. Daniel Webster, along with Oscar-winner Ellen Burstyn cast as his bishop. The article did not say if Jesus Christ would be played by himself, or yet another stand-in imposter. Frankly, my only concern is that if the show is a flop and the ratings aren't showing promise for NBC's bottom line, poor 'ol Jesus will get cancelled once again.

But trying to figure out what the real Jesus would say and do in any day and age subsequent to the one in which he lived and died is something that is as old as, say, Matthew's early Christian faith community taking some stories and sayings they'd collected from original source material and an oral tradition -- and then applied their own interpretation.

That's what happens again and again when we return to those quirky little stories considered more authentic to the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth than almost anything else we have. As with the Parable of the Sower last week, this week's story of the Wheat and the Weeds is subject to subsequent interpretation. Here's Matthew's:

He turns the parable into an allegory. The Sower, he explains, is really meant to be understood as the "Son of Man" (a divine messianic title). The "field" represents the world, we're the "good seed," being children of the kingdom. The weeds among us are "children of the evil one," while the "enemy" who infiltrates the world by night is the evil one himself. The "harvest" represents the end of the age, and the "reapers" are really angels. The harvest, then, becomes a time to expunge all the evildoers from our midst, and cast them into a "furnace of fire, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth;" leaving only the righteous to "shine like the sun."

So in Matthew's re-telling of it, this parable of Jesus' about what the reign of God is like in our own midst becomes an allegorical tale of judgment in the hands of the gospel writer. Forget the ratings -- how popular such a spin might have been for his listeners. Despite the familiar contemporary ring to it, is Matthew's allegorical interpretation what Jesus really meant to convey?

In its original version, Jesus drew on an agrarian image that would have been very familiar to the Galilean peasant tenant farmers to whom he preached. In the arid conditions and rocky soils, where it was difficult to grow anything good, the opportunistic, hardier weeds would often be more successful in surviving under such conditions.

Now add to that the basic assumption that in the ancient world the seeming natural order of things was never far removed from religious interpretation; that is, there was typically an explanation sought to understand some divine order and intention to what the Lord of the Harvest was going to do about

the obvious and recurrent weed problem. Under these circumstances, I betcha Jesus' first listeners must have been far more interested in the immediate problem of this year's crops, than some final dispensation at the end of the ages.

So, to this implied question of Jesus' first listeners of the original parable (i.e., *What is God going to do about the weed problem?*), the characters in the story are perfectly ready and willing – with all their righteous indignation -- to assume responsibility for fixing the divine screw-up that allowed the enemy into the field in the first place: "Shall we go gather up the weeds among the wheat?" they ask.

"No," the master replies.

No? Huh? No?? First their Master does nothing to stop the enemy. Then when they wonder if he's going to do anything about -- let alone if he's even *noticed* the presence of enemy in their midst -- listen to what the master says. When the servants offer to root out the results of the evil doer in their midst themselves, the master says "no, leave it be." "For in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest ..."

"Let both of them grow together until the harvest ...?" Hardly an acceptable strategy! What is our understanding – let alone our tolerance-level and patience – for such a place as Jesus not only describes, but even dares to call "kingdom of heaven?" In our righteous, retaliatory zeal, our acceptance and understanding appears to be rather minimal.

Even so, the question remains: What do we do with the weeds among the wheat? What do we do with the evil clearly in our midst; until the such time as the harvest -- *which has not yet come, remember* -- arrives at last?

On the evening newscast last Thursday, I watched a modern day parable. It was a real story, rather than a fictional tale meant to bolster slumping ratings in the TV entertainment industry. There was an American news crew filming the daily crisis in an emergency ward of a downtown Baghdad hospital. It was a typical day, when dozens of civilian dead and wounded are rushed to this over-crowded, under-staffed, ill-equipped trauma center. On a bad day, that city sustains as many casualties as the one terrorist attack in London ten days ago. Except in Baghdad, it has happened every day, for months, and months, and months.

Now, looking at the television, the film footage depicts frantic families and friends of the wounded rushing to find their loved ones among the wounded, who writhe in pain, and wail and gnash their teeth. An old man crouches on his hind legs over someone who is dying, and beats his own face with his fists in grief.

I look at those images in dismay, shock and an uneasy understanding as I think to myself, it looks just like the "harvest" interpreted by Matthew as the biblical judgment day. But something's wrong with the picture, and the story: Somehow, in trying to pull up the weeds among the wheat, we have hastened the harvest and a premature judgment day that does not end ...

Last week, as British authorities announced to a shocked public the news an enemy had snuck into their fields at night; but that the perpetrators of their own first wave of suicide bombings were not only radical fanatics of the "evil one," but fellow citizens themselves; they were neighbors and acquaintances, most of them well-educated. One was a courteous, conscientious teacher's assistant in a grammar school.

We wonder, rhetorically: How can we root out the weeds of the evil one in the midst of the wheat, when we can't even tell them apart? But moreso, why then do we feign to act so shocked when we realize we cannot? Why do we instead act more shocked when Jesus suggests we let them both grow together, "for in gathering the weeds we uproot the wheat along with them?" And, in doing so, we hasten a harvest of judgment on us all?

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On Thursday, Britain paused for two minutes of silence in honor of the innocents killed and injured the week before. Meanwhile, in Leeds, Beeston's Cross Flats Park, in the center of this now embattled town, a young Muslim named Sanjay Dutt, age 22, grappled to understand why his friend, whom he once called Kakey – and whom the world knows now as Shehzad Tanweer -- had decided to become a suicide bomber.

"He was sick of it all, all the injustice and the way the world is going about it," Sanjay said. "Why, for example, don't they ever take a moment of silence for all the Iraqi kids who die?"

Why, I wonder further, don't we even *count* them? We honor the sacrifice of every fallen American foot soldier; and all the while now even go to such extraordinary lengths to unearth and catalogue the remains of so many victims of a former, brutal regime. While we simultaneously maintain a policy to intentionally *not* count the innocents who become civilian casualties day after day in Baghdad; as if the life of one of God's children is more precious than another. What sheer arrogance. What utter blasphemy.

In what is described as the "creeping anger" amongst young Muslims in Britain, might we not only discover a possible explanation of what motivated the unsuspected terrorist; but also an understanding to our perplexing question of what to do with the weeds amongst the wheat? Why should *we* care, in this blessed and abundant land that gently ripples with amber fields of grain?

Well, I think to myself, Germaine rides the local subway twice each day, five days each week, under the Bay to the City and back. Nearly every one of the thousands of the daily passengers carries a briefcase, a backpack or a purse.

Then I read an old gospel parable and more than wonder: Is there an inevitability to a hastened harvest of our own making? And one that is such a far cry from a parable of what the kingdom of heaven is likened to?

There is a thread, a thread of a theme, that runs through all the kingdom parables Jesus weaves for us; if only we – like our first century Galilean peasant farmer counterparts – can but first overcome our predisposed misunderstanding, then feigned shock, disbelief and indignation, then our intolerance and impatience for the reign of God to have its will and way in the fields of the Lord; and where, we might do well to remember, we are only tenants.

Every farmer knows how precarious the enterprise is when good seeds are planted, then exposed to all kinds of unpredictable and uncontrollable risks; with nothing more than the hope and longed-for promise of an eventual fruitful harvest. For believers in the kind of reign of God which Jesus describes, it is what I can only describe as *a thread of hope, and promise of faith*.

It is that thread which Paul understood amidst what he aptly describes in his Letter to the Romans as the “sufferings of this present time,” when the creation has been “subjected to such futility.” Does it sound familiar? “Groaning inwardly in labor pains,” he says, it “waits with eager longing ... to be set free from the bondage of decay ...” and become, like us, “adopted as children of God.”

“Adopted” and “saved,” he says. “Redeemed,” as in *once lost, but now saved*. As if we ourselves were once *nothing more than weeds*. We ourselves have been transformed from weeds, once worth nothing more than to be pulled up and thrown in the fire. A weed or flower, who’s to say? The difference may be found in nothing more than a thin thread of hope. As Paul writes,

“For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

So now, in the face of daily attacks and unrelenting evil, how can we speak of patience? How can we tell the world a parable about a place of patience, and mercy, or compassion, even wisdom and understanding? And Grace? It is the *pre-season of Grace*. With humble thanks, let us remember: It’s a good thing we ourselves were not plucked too soon, thinking the harvest of judgment had come!

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So, now we’re all on the tip-toe of expectation, awaiting NBC’s new show, *The Book of Daniel*. In the pre-season of broadcaster’s wildest hopes and dreams how might they assure a blockbuster hit? André, our member in our congregation who first alerted me to the upcoming sit-com (?), drama (?), even suggested the network consider the following storyline:

Well if NBC is looking for out-of-the-box shows so we could always suggest a small Clayton parish, where the congregation is really comprised of secret anti-terrorist hunters. Each week a guest terrorist would be portrayed

by a celebrity. The altar could flip over mid-show and reveal an elaborate James Bondish console of anti-spy technology etc..... oh yeah, and Rector’s beautiful daughter could be some kung-fu kicking heroine who helps save the day! Now we just need a better, flashy name for the show!!!! Maybe, “*The Saga of JB, and the Clayton flock?*”

Maybe not.

We wring our hands and ask ourselves, and each other, how can we rid the master’s fields of such evil in our midst; without destroying the world to save it? Then the thread of hope and faith in the gospel parables of Jesus shock and save us with a different vision, if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear: How can all of creation be transformed, redeemed, saved? How can this thorny weed patch become the kingdom of heaven?

Amen. *jb+*