

10th Week after Pentecost, Proper 11 – Year A – July 20, 2008
Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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Most police investigations involve evidence gathering. Part of that process is interviewing witnesses. Consider the scene of a car accident at a busy intersection. There are probably several witnesses, each with a unique perspective. All the witnesses make statements based on their viewpoint so that the police can piece together the incident as clearly as possible.

Like the witness accounts at an accident scene each Gospel account also comes with a unique perspective. Similarly, in communications theory, the way you and I see, hear, and understand occurs by means of our personal filters. Our communication filters develop through our life experiences, our prejudices and biases, and other personality traits like how trusting we are, whether we are extroverts or introverts, and so on.

As we have seen in our journey through the Gospel of Matthew, there are a few filters present, an angle or a particular take on Jesus' life and ministry that are reflected in the writing. Contextually, Matthew's community of believers would relate to the parable of the wheat and the weeds. There is a lot of black and white in this parable, at least at first glance, which would be highly appealing to the Matthean community in their ongoing debate with other first century Judeans. The parable is explicit in describing two types of crops: wheat and weeds. The wheat represents the children of God's kingdom, whereas the weeds represent the children of the evil one. The fate of the two crops at the end of all the ages is also graphically described. I checked the original Greek thoroughly to see if there was any ambiguity in the translation. There isn't. In Matthew's black and white account of Jesus' story of the wheat and weeds, the words translated as "furnace of fire" really mean furnace of fire; and those translated as "weeping and gnashing of teeth" have no other valid translation from the original Greek. Interestingly, as we pursue our own investigation of this parable, we note that it only appears in the Gospel of Matthew. Unlike the parables of the sower, and the mustard seed, today's story is unique to the witness of Matthew.

In the linearity of our lives, the temporal context between when Matthew was writing and our own era is also part of this puzzle. For one thing Matthew may be using deliberate exaggeration to make a point in the distinctly Jewish style of hyperbole. Another contextual issue to hold in mind is the popular use of apocalyptic imagery and language. The Book of Daniel is full of it, and so is Matthew – more so than any other Gospel account. So what do we do with it? Let's dig a little deeper and see if we can begin to unravel this mystery.

As any police officer will tell you, the information you glean is only as good as the questions you ask. German theologian and Biblical scholar, Luise Schottroff, has three questions for you and I to consider, that will help us to get to the heart of this and other parables. The first is this: where is the Good News to be found in this parable? That is the "liberating message" of the Gospel. Secondly, where is the Torah, God's Law in this parable? The Torah is not in opposition to the Gospel, it is as Jesus says in Matthew chapter 5 that in Him the Law and the prophets are not abolished, but fulfilled. Thirdly, what does this parable say about God's promise? The promise of God here is the culmination and consummation of God's purpose in the history of the world and through God's plan of salvation.

Like all Jesus' parables, it requires you and me to be actively engaged in thinking it through. The parables are meant to be simple stories, often drawn from everyday life experiences that challenge us to think about the deeper questions of life and God. In the delightful and paradoxical way of God's kingdom, the simplicity belies great profundity for those who have ears to hear. Delving into that richness requires us to listen, hear and try to understand. It requires us to question, dive in, and most importantly to respond. Parables are provocative to all who hear them with an open heart, and an inquiring mind. Throughout Scripture Jesus always presents Himself and the Good News, in a way that demands each person He encounters to make their own response. As we look at this parable and Schottroff's insightful questions, we can see several snippets of Good News, and I know that you will also find others that I am blind to. This is

an example of why Christians are called in community. Our gifts complement one another, and so in our Episcopal and Lutheran traditions the interpretation of the Word of God has traditionally been done in community. None of us shares the same set of life experiences. We are all molded by God in distinctive ways. In other words, God has created a world and a kingdom where we all need each other, and where we all have a unique perspective to bring to the study of God's Word in community.

In terms of the Good News contained in this story Jesus tells it like it is: there are children of God in the kingdom, and there are people who are actively seeking to undermine the work of God in the world. Why is that Good News? For two reasons: it is a tremendous relief that it is neither my ministry nor your ministry to figure out, or make judgments about who is who in the crop ratings. Secondly, God blesses all with the gift of time. For you and me that means we are always called to share the Gospel of Jesus, because while there is time there is hope that we can bring those who do not know Christ to the knowledge and love of Him. Here's some more Good News: the image of fire is used in many places in Scripture. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is most often used to describe God's presence. For example, God is in the pillar of fire leading the Israelites out of Egypt to safety; it is God's chariot of fire that carries Elijah directly to heaven. For the prophet Isaiah, it is the fire of the Lord that executes judgment. In the New Testament, John the Baptist announces that Jesus will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is described as tongues of fire. Jesus is God's gift to humanity. The Holy Spirit is God's gift to humanity. As we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, the gift of divine fire is that which purifies, and removes from us all things that are not of God. The Good News of the fire is that it is the flame of God's love for you and for me and for all people. It is a flame meant to melt the iciest of hearts, and gently burn away all that is not of God from our lives. The image of God as fire connects the Law of Torah and the New Testament. It is a consistent message of God's plan of salvation and reconciliation for all creation. This image is also a piece of God's ultimate promise – all that is not of God in our lives, all that does not flow from our love of God and our neighbor has no part in God's kingdom. In describing everything in his life before he knew Jesus, Paul says in Philippians 3, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

So why would there be weeping and gnashing of teeth for those who have actively worked against God's plan and desire for all creation? We can and should think about that for ourselves. For my part, I believe that Matthew's message can be summed up in one word: pride. A proud heart will always take its own path, without regard for God or neighbor, and it is precisely a proud heart that will suffer the greatest sense of loss when God's promise *is* fulfilled. It is then that each heart that has refused to bow to the Lord in the humility due His Name as the sovereign creator of the universe, will finally know that God is God and that they are not. That is truly a painful lesson. One that Matthew describes as a blazing fire for the Lawless whose hearts remain hardened against God's will. Many of us have already learned this lesson, and have come to God with humble and contrite hearts -- perhaps more than once in our lives. We are already living in God's kingdom. Our mission is to continue to expand God's kingdom. You and I, as Jesus' disciples are called to model His way. It is a way of humility, and our lives must become more and more a living testament in word and deed to hearts filled to overflowing with gratitude for all that God has blessed us with.

Just like running a red light at an intersection, the spiritual choices of our lives carry consequences. This parable is a tale of truth and consequences, but we must never forget that judgment belongs to God alone. There is yet at least one other piece of Good News for you and I to share as we strive to discern God's will for our lives and the life of this community. God's love and mercy are inseparable from God's perfect judgment. This investigation will never be a closed book. In the meantime are you willing to be a witness?

Amen.