

## Telling the Difference

Telling the difference seems to be an issue that is at the center of a lot of decisions we need to make in many areas of our lives. We make observations and make judgments based on the differences we observe. When we look at the parable which forms the story read his morning which Jesus told to the crowd and then later explained to the disciples that certainly is what stands out as being the important factor...even the title given to the parable in most of our texts makes reference to concern about detecting differences between the weeds or tares among the wheat. This teaching in Matthew follows immediately after the parable about that sower who broadcast his seed so abundantly that it fell in some unlikely places which did not bear fruit, but when a seed did grow, the crop that was produced was unexpectedly abundant. Here Jesus gives us an identity for this field and the one sowing seeds from the beginning: "The kingdom of heaven," Jesus says, "may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;" So we know from the beginning Jesus is speaking about God's reign; that what is being sown is the message of God's love...the word that Jesus is bringing...and the field is the world of humanity that Jesus has come to redeem. As this narration proceeds, we clearly get the image that not all goes as planned by the sower or householder as he is named here. "but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away." Since everyone was asleep when this second sowing happened, this problem was not immediately detected according to the narrative which continues this way: "So when the plants came up and bore grain, then 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?' It seems those who are working in the field notice something is amiss and at first assume something must have been faulty with the seed that was sown. This possibility is eliminated immediately by the reply of the householder: "He answered, 'An enemy has done this.'" Thus even without going to the explanation that Jesus will give the disciples we know that the seed sown, the message itself was good, there were no errors or misleading words planted in the field. There was nothing within the message that was sown to lead to the production of weeds in the field of the kingdom. Those seeking an excuse for there being weeds could not find it there. The next portion of the parable as it is initially told comes from those who are workers in the field for the household. They propose a solution for those weeds that they perceive growing there. "The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?'" And doesn't that sound like the best solution to us. When the householder's workers notice that there are weeds in the field, their first response is to question the quality of the seeds sown, but when assured that the seed was good they become anxious to take of the problem by rooting those nasty weeds right out...immediately. They don't want to wait to give them a change to develop...get rid of them right now! What the householder does is point out is this might not be a good idea because of the particular nature of the weed and the crop that is growing together. As would have been familiar to the crowd listening to the parable, in that area there is a noxious weed that closely resembles wheat. It is plentiful in Israel and the seeds are easily scattered by the wind, easily accounting for their presence among a carefully planted field. They grow easily and are difficult to differentiate until the ears of the grain form and mature near the time of harvest. So the householder's reply to his enthusiastic workers is: "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the

wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until 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.” This ends the parable as Jesus tells it before the crowd. He then goes on to tell two other brief parables before he leaves the crowd and goes into the house where the disciples ask him to explain about the parable concerning the weed and the wheat to them. This parable has ended with a statement about a time of separation of weed and wheat and a harvest where one is kept and the other destroyed. An indication of implied consequence and judgment which is probably why the disciples seek clarification about this specific parable and not the other two parables in the verses our reading omits this morning. The gospels don’t contain many places where Jesus speaks of judgment, but here and in Matthew 25 there are clearly two examples given to us about consequences and judgment which will happen when God’s reign does come fully to the earth. The mention of possible judgment tends to gain our attention. So upon their request, Jesus gives his disciples their explanation. His explanation begins like this: “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.” Since “Son of Man” is the title by which Jesus usually refers to himself, this is very similar to the parable of the sower. Jesus is the householder who has the good seed and is sowing it. The good seed now seems to be the more than just message he has been sent to proclaim; the field is the world and Jesus is successfully spreading the message. He continues: “the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom;” This is a little different than the seed just being the message. Now Jesus’ sowing the message has begun to grow in the world has claimed the children for the kingdom. The message, the good seed from the first parable has taken root and produced that abundant crop in claimed people. The message is growing within and producing disciples and those belonging to the kingdom. But all is not proceeding without problems as is revealed in the appearance of the weeds within the householder’s field. In his explanation Jesus identifies the weeds as the children of the evil one sowed by the devil. This sets up the comparison as an either or situation...good versus evil...with no area of grey in between...no modifying conditions...and that is often how we view the world when we are looking outward. This sets up, as we often do, a dichotomy. And the establishment of dichotomies is dangerous and has material implications which I think this parable serves to illustrate and warn us about. Dichotomies such as “us versus them” or as stated here “good versus evil” can be dangerous. The householder’s response serves as a cautionary tale to us about our ability to tell the difference. The parable does not gloss over that there are two types of plants growing in the field, just that there is a problem in differentiating between them unless you are the one sent to do so as a reaper at the proper time...the time of the harvest when the crop is mature. This harvest will come at the end of the age when the Son of Man will send angels to perform the task. The task will be to collect out of the kingdom all causes of sin and all evil doers. What is noticeable is that although the slaves who are the workers of the field in the parable want to jump in and get rid of the weeds early in the process, they are not the ones given the task. In fact, they are assigned no active role in this parable at all. So what are the lessons from this parable for us...Looking around our world it is not hard for us to tell that both good and evil co-exist today as they have throughout the history of humankind. Whether we find that narrative in the parable we read this morning, in the story that Paul describes of internal conflict between what one desires to do and what one knows one should do according to the teachings of our Lord, in much of the great literature of the world or in the news stories broadcast

daily...both human heroism and human cruelty can be seen and heard. What can also be found in many of these formats is that sometimes the lines which mark the boundaries between them have something in common with the weed and wheat in the parable...it is not always easy to see them as purely one or the other...the dichotomy is not as clear cut as you would like. Jesus is telling us here that we need to leave making these judgments up to God who knows us intimately as it tells us in Psalm 139. This doesn't mean we have to accept the act which is sinful, or adopt it, or condone it. But it does tell us that we need to be careful about how we approach this "weeding" process. I mean we probably feel like those workers, a little disappointed that we are not given the go ahead to clear the field of all those nasty weeds. I mean we know the scriptures, what the teachings tell us the kingdom should like, don't we? So we could do a pretty good job of separating out the weeds from the wheat. How hard can it be to tell them apart? Weeding, while hard work, is satisfying. Obliterate anything that might thwart the growth of the crop we want to cultivate, weed, sort and clear out all those things that we know are the weeds. Ken Fuquay and the Threefold Chord do a song that I think speaks to this. It is called the Man in the Mirror and starting the change needed there. Because, the reason we need to have a prayer of confession in our worship service is that there is always a little bit of weed pulling needed within each life. That is why when we want to start pulling weeds we need to start with the man in the mirror, then leave the rest of the weed pulling in others up to God. We are called to follow the lead of the sower in the first parable, to broadcast the good seed message of God's love and then to tend it and let whatever comes up grow. Then let God do the sorting and judging. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.