

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)
St. Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field...”

The Sower is at work again. As you heard last week, He casts His seed lavishly everywhere He can, seeking His harvest from everywhere. His seed is good; it is His Word, and it accomplishes the task for which it is cast, in some 100-fold, in others 60-, and in others 30-; in today’s parable, the seed is the sons of the kingdom—the Church.

But, according to today’s parable, the Sower is not the only one at work. The evil one is always at work, too.

Yes, he comes along as a bird to snatch away the seed from those who do not understand—who refuse to hear and understand it. The evil one is at work also with the world and your own sinful flesh to stir up doubt and despair that God does not care for you, in order that you might fall away from the Sower and not produce the fruit for which the seed of His Word was cast to you.

But this evil one is crafty in his means. For, he also comes as one who sows “weeds among the wheat” and goes away. “So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also.” These weeds look like the wheat to the untrained eye; the Sower and His servants are able to discern the difference, though.

Concerned for the crop, the servants ask if they should go to gather the weeds. It’s certainly a good thought: remove the weeds so that they do not hinder the wheat. But the Sower objects, “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest...” The servants may be able to discern the difference, but in the process of picking the weeds, they may bring out some of the wheat, too. That’s too great a risk for the Sower. Wait until the harvest, the Sower tells them, “[A]nd at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

The evil one is crafty in that He creates a false church and sows it together with the true Church on earth. Those in the church are usually unable to see a difference, though the false church can be discernible to the well-trained eye—to the well-catechized eye—at least to a point. However, the Sower and His servants and reapers certainly know the difference.

The Sower stays his servants’ hands: Do not uproot the false church from the true Church; wait until the harvest. He does this for two reasons. The first, as He mentions in today’s parable, is that doing so could cause harm to the true Church. For one reason or another, if the false church is plucked from the true Church, members of the false church would somehow take members of the true Church with them, bringing them to their end apart from the true Church. The second is that the Lord is patient. So long as members of the false church are intermingled within the true Church, the seed of God’s Word is cast to them; some of these, over time, will convert and become part of the true Church.

And so it will be until the end of time, as Jesus explained the parable to His disciples. Until the end of the age, the false church of the evil one will be sowed among the true Church of the kingdom of heaven. This is almost the visible vs. invisible church, as Walther termed them, and while there is some relation, the visible church is not exactly the same thing as the false church.

In other words, you can go into any church building and will not be able to tell who is part of the true Church and who is part of the false church with a simple look. With what amounts to a glance, you cannot tell where someone stands. Everyone you see in a church building are part of the visible church, as could be recognized as such by their being in the church building for its regular use and participating in the activities there, but whether they are included in the invisible, true church—the wheat—is indiscernible to the naked, sinful eye.

As I mentioned, though, the well-catechized eye can be able to discern the difference between the false church and the true Church, at least to a point. This should also be encouragement to be in constant study of God's Word—to read it, learn it, and inwardly digest it, as you heard in last weeks' collect—to take up a personal study of the Scriptures and have them read and explained to you in the Church. Then, by the grace of God, you can be able to discern the difference between the false church and true Church, not only as it pertains to others, at least with regard to outward presentation, but also to yourself.

For the false church is most simply this: it claims Jesus' name, prays in His name, claims to be His followers, but glories in sin. These are those "who call evil good, and good evil; [w]ho put darkness for light, and light for darkness; [w]ho put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter," as the prophet declared. (Isaiah 5:20) These claim to be Christian, but do not follow Christ and His Word. These will hold up false doctrines as Biblical—such as the ordination of women, blessing homosexuality, encouraging abortion, and admitting to the Lord's Table any and all who walk through the doors, among others—even claim that Jesus supports their false doctrine. These will do many churchly things, look very much like true Church, hold up their Bibles as the Word of God, but teach it errantly, call it relevant for a day and age past, or blatantly say that the Scriptures are incomplete and in need of supplemental authority, and the like. Even in the midst of the true church, they will do this by confessing with their mouth the true doctrine espoused at an altar, but believe in their hearts any and all sorts of false doctrine.

I suppose things could work the opposite way, too. It is possible that one who believes and confesses the truth would find themselves in a place where false doctrine is taught. In fact, I know that there are true believers in outwardly false churches. Try as I might, though, I can't imagine this situation working out too well, at least in the long run; for, just as the false believer being continually taught the truth may eventually be converted to the truth, so the true believer being continually subjected to false doctrine runs a very high risk of being converted to that which is false. Something more needs to happen.

Those who abide in the Word of God (cf. John 8:31) will be able to know those doctrines as false. Yet, there are people who claim to be Christian who hold to them as salutary; there are those who wholeheartedly believe they are Christian while holding to false doctrines because their church teaches them, and they do and believe what their church teaches, believing that their church teaches what Christ has taught (or what Christ would teach in this day and age, they would say).

Now, it is not my place or that of any of you to condemn one such as these. Speak the truth in love and point out the error of another, sure, but leave the condemnation to the one who will judge the whole world at the last day. As God counsels through the pen of St. Paul, "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God." (1 Corinthians 4:5) For, as St. Paul had also written, "It is the Lord who judges me." (1 Corinthians 4:4b)

Why? For as it was said in today's parable, by uprooting the weeds, some of the wheat may be uprooted, too. Remember that the false church is intermingled with the true Church. At first glance, members of each are indistinguishable, and even for a well-catechized eye it can be difficult to tell the difference. Furthermore, as was mentioned, the false church is not merely confined to one organization, and the true Church to another. You will find members of the false church in congregations that teach sound, orthodox doctrine; likewise, you will find members of the true Church in congregations that teach heresy. There will always be unbelievers in congregations that abide in God's Word, and even in congregations where the Word is still present and proclaimed from time-to-time, but that hold to heterodox teachings, there will be believers.

Furthermore, as also mentioned, God is immeasurably and unspeakably patient and merciful. In time, those who are members of the false church, as the seed of God's Word is continually cast at them, may convert. As they hear sound preaching, steadfastly study God's Word, and are lovingly shown the errors of their ways, they, too, can come to a knowledge of the truth, and be counted among those in the kingdom of heaven.

That's why it's not the place of anyone to condemn members of the false church. Though one can say with certainty that at the last day, things will not go well for those who remain part of the false church or died a part of it. For it is as Jesus said,

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Until that day, however, the false church will remain, and will be found scattered with and among the true Church. In fact, as time progresses, the false church will steadily grow, as even the outwardly unrighteous increase, while the true Church on earth will be but a remnant.

While that sounds discouraging, and to an extent it certainly is, there is still comfort in it. And it is this: the true Church will remain. The Lord will have his harvest. It is as has been sung many times in this hallowed hall:

For the Lord, our God, shall come / And shall take His harvest home; / From
His field shall in that day / All offenses purge away; / Give His angels
charge at last / In the fire the tares to cast, / But the fruitful ears to store /
In His garner evermore.

While the weeds are sown together with the wheat, even as was heard in today's parable, the harvest will come, and the wheat—the fruitful ears—will be gathered in His garner, in His eternal presence. Or, as Jesus explained to His disciples, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” And so, until that day, the true Church's prayer is always, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus,” even as is sung in that same hymn:

Even so, Lord, quickly come / To Thy final Harvest-home; / Gather Thou Thy
people in, / Free from sorrow, free from sin, / There, forever purified, / In
Thy garner to abide. / Come with all Thine angels, come, / Raise the
glorious Harvest-home.

So, you can take comfort, for the harvest is coming. It may not be this moment, this year, or even in this lifetime, but you have this sure and certain promise from Christ: it is coming. Until then, He comes to His Church—He is proclaimed to the world, true Church and false church alike, as the Savior of the world. He is proclaimed as the God who sacrificed Himself, shedding His blood for the forgiveness of sins.

Furthermore, He continues to come and give of Himself to the true Church for Her preservation. He is Her Head, and She His Bride; therefore, it is only fitting that He who gave Himself to make Her His would continue to give of Himself to keep Her His—He would not forsake His Bride. And so, He comes to you dear hearers—He who gave His body and shed His blood for you on the cross to make you a part of His Bride, to make you His brother and fellow heir of glory in eternity—and He gives you His body and blood hidden in bread and wine to keep you as a part of His Bride—that you may remain His brother and fellow heir of glory in eternity.

Fear not, O little flock, for while a remnant will remain, the Lord will have His harvest, and He desires that you be in it. He makes you a part of it through the waters of Holy Baptism. He keeps you a part of it in the Words of Holy Absolution, in the forgiveness given to you as the Word is proclaimed to you, and as you eat His body and drink His blood. Yes, dear fellow Christians, you are a part of His harvest, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.