

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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There's no fight like a family fight. Politicians might yell at each other on the floor of the Senate, but I'm pretty sure they all have a drink afterward—probably with their lobbyists. Workplace arguments can sting, though they typically they end with some nasty emails or maybe a resignation. I've seen neighbors get into some pretty heated arguments, though, at the end of the day, they can go inside and shut the curtains. For my money, the worst kind of fights are the family fights. They're the ones that can really get their hooks in you. Mother against daughter; husband against wife; brother against brother. There's no fight like a family fight.

And really, isn't a church just a family? Some of you are probably aware that there have been a few good fights in our churches over the years. The fight over ordaining women to the priesthood comes to mind, as does the fight over the blessing of same-sex marriages. There are other fights over organs and endowments and budgets—dumb things that take on a whole new level of pain because the fight is in our churches, in our families. I've seen churches lose members and close over fights like these. I've seen people lose their faith and lose their way because they were so deeply hurt over a fight in their worshiping community. Perhaps you have too.

Hold those stories of pain in your mind when you hear the Gospel this morning. Matthew is writing in a time of deep division in his worshipping community. This group of Jewish people in the first century are starkly divided over the question of “who is Jesus?” Some members of the community believe Jesus to be a prophet like Elijah or Amos. Others believe that Jesus is something different, something more. They believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. And these two camps fight and eventually break with one another. So Matthew is writing out of a sense of pain, betrayal, loss, and fear. He's consoling his people, while at the same time admonishing them to keep the faith, follow Jesus, and resist the Roman empire. His rhetoric is divisive and potent. I usually call Matthew the angry Gospel—it's where we hear about the outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is all perfectly understandable. Have you ever sent an email angry and then read it later?

People in deep pain often feel like the world is getting smaller. It's easy to start thinking or writing in absolutes when we're in the middle of grief—black or white; good or bad; heaven or hell; weeds or wheat. We all know that the world doesn't work like that, but when we hurt, it's easy to become rigid in our thinking. And that's precisely what happens in today's Gospel.

Trying to find a context for Matthew's writings is a good piece of research and even a pretty interesting bit of psychoanalyzing, but I'm not sure it's a sermon. So what are Christians supposed to do with a Gospel witness that seems to be tainted by grief and anger? Why did our spiritual foremothers and forefathers read stories like this over and over in worship? Why do we do it today?

I wonder if a parable like the wheat and the weeds is an invitation to get a bit uncomfortable. I wonder if it acts like a jolt to us. We know that no one is wholly a weed and no one is wholly wheat. The world is too complicated for that. So are people for that matter. But we certainly have weeds and wheat growing inside us. Perhaps today's Gospel is an invitation to take a frank look at our souls to see if some field maintenance is in order. Perhaps it's an invitation to look closely at our community, to look closely at the mirror. Martin Luther famously said that we are at the same time saints as sinners (*simul justus et peccator* for you Latin fans). He could have just as easily said, "we are at the same time weeds as wheat."

By looking soberly at our lives at the invitation of this Gospel, we might take the opportunity to see the ways in which we are acting like citizens of the kingdom of God vs the ways we are acting like citizens of the kingdom of the world. In other words, are the weeds taking over? What do disciples of Jesus need to do to get their fields in order?

I've never been that good at an old-fashioned discipleship sermon—where I stand here and tell you the different, specific ways in which you should follow Jesus. I've got weeds aplenty up in this pulpit, and I'm not sure that I have special insights into how you might be a more wheat-like disciple.

But Matthew, writing to his hurting community, does. Even though he's writing to a people who are hurt and confused. Even though he's writing to people in the middle of a family fight so painful that the world seems cruel. Even though passages like today's jolt us out of our comfort and invite us into self-examination. Even then, Matthew gives us the world of Jesus that we so need to hear. Matthew teaches us how to be wheat in the world. So, angry gospel writer or not, I'll let Matthew close out this sermon. Remember when he said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Amen."