

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
July 19, 2020
Preached via Zoom during COVID-19

I used to joke that they teach priests just enough Biblical Greek to be pretentious but not enough to be proficient. Back when I was learning my Biblical languages, I had a professor who would give students excerpts from one of the Gospels, and one had to identify if it came from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. I would make up these little memory games to help me figure out where the texts were coming from. For instance, if there were a lot of women in the story, it was probably Luke. If it read like a fantasy novel, it was probably John. If Jesus was constantly in a hurry, I'd guess Mark. And if the passage sounded angry, my money was on Matthew. To this day, I think of Matthew as the angry gospel. Matthew gives us sheep and goats, wheat and chaff, outer darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. You get the impression that the author is furious and spreading nastiness in all directions.

This makes a lot of sense if you consider the context of the writing and the audience. The earliest Christians found themselves at odds in the synagogues. Some people felt like the Messiah had arrived in the person of Jesus. And others did not. So, in the very same worshipping community, you find two groups all of a sudden at odds with one another. Some of you remember how women's ordination split parishes and dioceses in two and how the rhetoric around that event could be absolutely vicious. The same goes for the community to which Matthew was writing. They have been asked to leave the synagogue on account of their beliefs, and a massive family fight started.

So when the gospel text this morning talks about the wheat and the weeds, the followers of Jesus who were licking their wounds clearly saw themselves as wheat and their former friends in the synagogue as the weeds.

I can completely relate to this. I think about different times in my life where I thought, "wow, she will get hers one day." Or, "they're going to live to regret this!."

I think Jesus' parable in Matthew is acting like a balm for an angry people. Things seem terrible now, but one day, you will be vindicated and this pain will have had some meaning.

Matthew's message to the small Christian community that was busy licking its wounds sounds eerily germane to us. Our woundedness at the moment isn't because of a fight in our parish; rather it is about an all-encompassing pandemic and the subsequent sluggish government response and accompanying loss of life. In fact, when the gospel talks about the weeds growing among the wheat, I couldn't help but think that the weeds were a decent metaphor for the coronavirus — insistent, pernicious, ubiquitous — as anyone who has ever weeded a garden will tell you.

So, I think that this parable speaks to our current situation. Yes, there are weeds in the field today, but that won't always be the case. God promises a time when "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." I think the author was probably talking about some kind of mystical judgment at the end of time, but I tell you right now that on the day we re-enter the parish with one another, I'm sure that we will all be shining like the sun. I don't think we have to wait until death or until the end of time to experience the riches of the love of God among us.

I'm older and, hopefully, a little wiser than when I was doing those exercises in Greek class many years ago. Then I called Matthew angry. Now, though, I think I could call him hurt. The community was devastated after the big fight in the synagogue. We are devastated that we've been kept from gathering together in person with one another. They were mad at their former friends. We are mad at a dastardly virus. I look forward to the day that it's vaccinated out of existence, and I hope that it gets cast into outer darkness. I can relate to the kind of words that Matthew is using here.

But while I am angry, I have to acknowledge that really, underneath it all, I'm just sad. Sad that our way of life has been so altered, and sad that so many people in our world are suffering from this disease. And so I look to the promise of Jesus in the Gospel today. Our current struggle is not the final answer. There is something after it. We can be mad. We can be hurt. And we can express those huge feelings to one another, through art, through prayer. But what we can't do is to give up the hope that there is something more waiting for us on the other side of this hardship. Because that is the Good News of Jesus — that war, separation, sickness, and death are never the final answers. In God's time, we will shine like the sun again. One day. Amen.