The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 11—Year A
Genesis 28:10-19a
Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Oh, this is such a great gospel passage—**weeds, enemies, the evil one, the devil, evildoers, the furnace of fire, and weeping and gnashing of teeth**! What more could we ask for? You know there are some verses omitted today—**verses 31-35**. I'm always curious about omitted verses—what juicy tidbits has the lectionary left out? Well, in this instance, it's **the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast that leavens all the flour**. Not so juicy after all. So it's interesting that the *only* parable the disciples want Jesus to unpack is this **parable of the weeds in the field**. They didn't ask about **the mustard seed, or the yeast**—they want to know about **the weeds**. And so do we, because this parable sounds scary.

Let's dive in.

First, let's remember, Jesus is telling a *parable*—a story, a puzzle, more similar to a Buddhist koan, there to tease us into uncomfortable places that will pull us deeper.

So, **"the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was *asleep,* an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.**

Okay, item to note here. **The enemy**, the one who *opposes*, think *oppositional energy***, the enemy comes in and sows weeds among the wheat while everyone is *asleep***. Let's just stop right there. Are we *awake* or are we ***asleep***? What are some of the things that are deadening our senses, that are putting us to **sleep**, even when our eyes are open and we are moving about this world? *(pause)* **The weeds get sown** when *we're not paying attention, when we're not being mindful.*

And these ***weeds*** *aren't so easy to distinguish from the* ***wheat*** as you might think. These **weeds** are *tares, a kind of darnel* to be specific, *which looks a whole lot like* ***wheat*** and is really hard to distinguish *from* **wheat**, especially when they are both *immature*.

Oh, we could spend the rest of the day unpacking this idea. As we move about this world walking *our* path, there are others moving about this world walking *their* path. And though we might think our roots are *definitely* springing from the **wheat** seed, what if our roots are coming from the **darnel** seed? And as we are stumbling along *our* way, in our less mature moments, it *might be really hard to tell these two paths apart*. It's not as clear as we might like to think.

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the 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?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.'

An enemy has done this…what *forces of opposition* are sowing seeds among **the field of this world** right now? It feels like everything is in *opposition* these days on every front—religious, political, racial, ethnic, economic—*the powers of opposition* are working night and day **sowing *these seeds of dissension.***

The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' They've got kind of "let's rip 'em out" mentality. But that is a dangerous, dangerous approach.

But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the 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.'"

When the **weeds** and the **wheat** look almost identical, if you go trying to cut that **weed** out, you're going to lose the **wheat**, as well.

Also important to note here, *we don't have the capacity to discern which is which*. We're not in charge of designating ourselves **"wheat"** and labeling all those *oppositional* souls *over there* **"weeds."**

Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil;

The field is the world, and the Son of Man, Jesus, is sowing a lot of good seed across the world:

- seeds of love—for God, for neighbor, for enemy, for self
- seeds of nonviolence
- seeds of radical welcome
- seeds of sitting down to a meal with just about anybody, and often with people that *someone* would think he ought not to sit down with—lepers, Samaritans, women, tax collectors, Roman sympathizers, oppressive religious leaders, soldiers, rich people, poor people, on and on.

The **children of the kingdom** are those who are talking as Jesus talked and doing as Jesus did—all that **"go and do likewise"** stuff.

The weeds are children of the evil one—this is what happens to us when *that one who likes to sow pain and trouble and dissension* gets into our psyche. At the root, this **evil one** is operating from a place of *intense desire*. We all can touch *intense desire*, and sometimes that *intense desire* can lead us astray. Remember, sin means *"to miss the mark"*—you're aiming here but your shot goes there. *Intense desire*, even for just ends, can surely lead us astray in the getting there.

And Jesus is clear, the *force of opposition* **sowing these weeds**—it's **the devil**.

The devil, διάβολος, the one who likes *to throw things over and throw them apart*. Now then, I'm a good Episcopalian, and I can spin out some good metaphorical theology about **the devil**. I clearly don't believe in red pitchfork, long tail, horned guy. But I've found myself thinking quite deeply about **the devil** the last week.

It started at Wild Goose when I was sharing when a friend and fellow priest about a narrative I'd been spinning in my head about myself for quite a while. Now I know that I'm not the only one in this room that can lock down on a narrative about myself. You know, that endless loop that can run in your head that is going to be some version of how *you are not enough*. I have my own story, but right now, I want to you let the story you tell yourself on your worst days rise to the surface of your mind.

Now then, as I shared my narrative with my friend, she told me in no uncertain terms, and with a good bit of flowery language, that *that story was a lie*, and then she said, ***"That's the devil talking!"*** Her words hit something in me. I don't often think about **the devil** as an objective force opposing good, and yet, we profess just such a belief in our baptismal renunciations, and it always rings true to me there. But in my daily life, I haven't thought much about it.

My friend got me to thinking, and this made me curious about **the devil**. I thought, *"I have to know more about **the devil**."*

So, I went to one of my colleagues who takes **the devil** seriously and knows a whole lot about **demons**. I asked him about it. And he told me, *"You don't talk with **the devil**. You don't negotiate or debate with **the devil. The devil** needs to be bound and cast out in **the name of Jesus**. Jesus is the only one strong enough to cast out the devil."* He had my attention. And here's why—because I've tried every way I know to get this narrative I've been telling myself to stop, and it just won't go away. I've spent a lot of energy trying to *prove* to that voice that *I'm worthy, or enough, or whatever*, and all that negotiating and debating doesn't make that voice go away—*that voice is insatiable*.

But I know one thing, all my wrestling with this narrative absolutely *distracts* me from exercising ***all the power and light that God has placed within me***. What if my priest friends are right? What if **the devil** really is trying *to throw me apart, trying to cast me away from* that ***power and light***? What if **the devil** is doing **the devil's** best to get me, and all of us, to ***hide our light under a bushel***? And if **the devil** can get us to do that, then **the devil** has free reign ***to sow seeds of opposition*** everywhere *because* if we're operating from our **Godgiven power and light**, then we are walking in **the way of Jesus** with patience and grace and mercy and compassion and **power**; and when we are walking in *that* way, then we are capable of finding third ways, then we are capable of welcoming even our **enemy** to the table, and **the devil** wants no part of that! What *revolution* might be unleashed if *all of us* were operating from our **Godgiven power and light**?

I think we need to start contemplating **the devil** in a serious way because look around us—there are a lot of **weeds** and a lot of **wheat** growing side-by-side and *distraction* is the name of the game.

Jesus continues, **"The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."**

Okay, we're back to scary talk. But let's let the parable work on us. **The reapers are angels**—*messengers of good news*—and think those who ministered to **Jesus** when he had gone toe-to-toe with **the devil** in **the wilderness wrestling all the temptations** that face us in our day and time. And though the text says that **they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin**, the greek really talks about *stumbling blocks, those things that cause us to stumble,* and what if chief among those *stumbling blocks* are ***the stories we tell ourselves—the stories we tell ourselves about others <u>and</u> the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves***. Frankly, I'd be glad for **the angels to collect *those* stumbling blocks and throw them into the furnace of fire.**

And **evildoers**, oh, the greek is more complicated than that. Everyone knows what an **evildoer** is, right? You could probably name some right now in your head. Well, **evildoer** is a combination of two words—*the one who executes well + the condition of being without law, either because you're ignorant of it or you blatantly violate it*. So, it's *the one who can execute well living <u>out</u> of alignment with the law,* and *law* is shorthand for *the ways we live when we are living our lives in alignment with God—loving whom God loves, caring for whom God cares, standing firm against those things that would destroy the creatures of God.*

Could it be that *our lives* could get so *<u>out</u> of alignment* **that the angels might minister best by gathering those lives up and throwing them into the furnace of fire where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth**? Okay, again, sounds sort of scary, but **weeping** is another way of talking about *lament* and **gnashing of teeth** is just another way to talk about *despair*. When we are *living lives <u>out</u> of alignment, we do need to lament, and we can absolutely find ourselves living in despair.*

And **the furnace of fire** is none other than that used for **smelting**—*that process where metal is extracted from its ore—or for burning earthen ware, or for baking bread*. In other words, the **furnace of fire** often *burns away that which is not useful so that what is **precious** can be revealed,* or it is *the place where lifegiving things are created*. That piece of us that *thrives in dissension* and *loves to oppose* will surely *lament* and *despair* as it **gets burned away**, but all that will be left is **that person that can live a righteous life**, which is just another way of saying ***living a life aligned with the most beautiful, truest, most compassionate, loving, and merciful ways of God***. And indeed, when we are living *there*, **we are shining like the sun**, and **the devil** hates the thought of that.

So, know this, **the devil** is *relentless*—reread *The Screwtape Letters* if you doubt that—**the devil** is *relentless*, but **the Son of Man is eternal**. **The devil** may **sow the weeds**, but **Jesus is Lord of the harvest. We are all wheat**, and truth be told, **we've all got our share of weeds—Jesus and his angels can sort us out**, if we can just surrender, knowing that ***some of the stuff we carry really does need to be gathered up and tossed into the furnace where something new and beautiful and good can be forged.***

There's a lot in this passage this morning. A lot for us to think about and puzzle over. And so **Jesus** leaves the only way he can, **"Let anyone with ears listen!"**

"Listen," these are serious times calling for serious discernment; **the field of this world is full of wheat and weeds**. **The devil** is loose, but he's no match for **the Son of Man and his angels**. May God sort us out, beginning with ***the weeds and wheat in our own hearts and souls***, May God sort us out until **we are all shining like the sun**. Amen.

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