

July 23, 2017: Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43: Modern Day Crusaders

If you have ever been in love, like head over heels in love, you have had moments when you were so focused on the object of your affection that you were completely oblivious to everything around you. I remember one experience I had like that, several years ago. My wife and I were out by ourselves, without the children (actually it was just one at the time). We were enjoying a nice meal together at one of our favorite restaurants, and I just couldn't take my eyes off the still-simmering steak that had just been set down in front of me.

Of course it was my wife I couldn't take my eyes off of. Both of us were enjoying our time together so much that we were paying little attention to what was going on outside and didn't realize that the weather had taken a turn for the worse. When we had entered the restaurant there was an intermittent drizzle; as we approached the door to leave we realized the drizzle had turned into a torrential downpour.

We stood in the little foyer area for some time, waiting with the hopes that the rain would let up, at least long enough for us to get to the car, which was parked close to one hundred yards away. After a while it became apparent that the situation was getting worse, not better; I knew what had to be done. I looked at Dawn, and said "You wait here, I'll go get the car."

There was another lady standing nearby who was waiting for her table. She had been listening in on our conversation. After hearing me volunteer to go get the car she said, "It's nice to see that chivalry is not dead."

What exactly is chivalry? The word "chivalry" takes us back in time, hundreds of years ago to the period of history known as the Middle Ages, to the brave men (and perhaps even a few women) who were known as Knights. Knights were the warriors of that day; known for their long spears, heavy swords, and shiny armor...but Knights were known most of all for the strict code of law they were required to follow. This law was called chivalry.

Chivalry had something to do with how a man was supposed to treat a woman...but went far beyond that to encompass how to be virtuous in all areas of life, especially in regard to one's religion, which for the Knights, was Christianity. One expression of this was their participation in a series of military campaigns known as "The Crusades." The Crusades were the attempts of Christian warriors to go to Palestine and liberate Jerusalem and other holy places from Muslim domination. The word "crusade" literally means "going to the Cross." There were actually a total of nine crusades, fought over the course of nearly two-hundred years.

It was the idea of chivalry, at least in part, that compelled Knights to risk their lives in defense of their faith. There were plenty who had ulterior motives. But many were acting in obedience to the Pope, who they recognized as God's representative on earth. They truly believed themselves to be defenders of the faith, soldiers in God's army. Pope Urban II, the Pope who ordered the first crusade, promised forgiveness and a free pass to heaven for any who lost their lives in these unholy "holy wars."

It is fairly obvious that Knights, at least in the traditional sense of armor wearing, sword carrying, horse riding men of valor...are a thing of the past. There are still Knights living today, and new ones continue to be made...but that's more of ceremonial Knighthood, not a literal one...nothing like the Knights of the

past. If you see an enemy approaching, I'm not sure if you want to call Sir Paul McCartney and Sir Elton John to come to your aid.

There are other aspects of this idea of knighthood that persist today. As I mentioned earlier, the idea of chivalry remains, particularly in regard to ideas about how a gentleman ought to treat a lady (though it is fading quickly). I understand some women find it a little condescending, but many think it is a good thing, especially if it's raining cats and dogs outside and the car is 100 yards away.

Something else that has carried over though, is the mentality of the crusades. Even though the last crusade was fought centuries ago, there are still crusaders among us, Christians who consider themselves to be modern day knights, defenders of the faith.

Some direct their attention outwardly, into the world, feeling it is their duty to fight against all those who challenge the beliefs and institutions of Christianity. There are others who believe the primary battlefield is within the church, who feel it is their duty to root out the evil doers, the false believers, the false teachers, and purify the Church. We should thank God for them...or should we? Is what they are doing a good thing? Maybe chivalry should die? At least in the church.

The Church of Jesus Christ is not a perfect, pure and undefiled entity. As one Pastor said to a congregation during his sermon, "if you find a perfect church, don't go there, because then it will no longer be perfect." The point I believe it was trying to make is that there is no such thing as a perfect church, and the reason is not because God is not perfect, but because churches are made up of people, and people are not perfect.

This is not a new development; the Church has always been this way. Even in the earliest days of the Church there were evil doers, and false believers, and false teachers. We saw evidence of that during our Wednesday Evening Bible Study on Revelation. There is plenty more in the letters of Paul and others, and even in the Gospels. Even the original twelve disciples had their flaws.

The Church has never been perfect, and it never will be, until Christ returns. Yet as long as the Church has been in existence, there have been people within it that have made it their mission to make it so. The disciples were no exception. It was in response to their desire to clean up the Church that Jesus told this parable of the weeds and the wheat.

In this parable Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven, or the church, to a farmer who sowed a field of wheat, only to have someone come behind him, an enemy, and sow the field with weeds. As the tiny heads of grain began to appear on the wheat the farmer's slaves noticed there were weeds growing within the wheat, and so they offered to pull them out. But the farmer told them not to for fear they may also uproot some of the wheat. Instead they were to leave them alone and let them grow until the harvest, at which point the reapers would sort them out, burning the weeds and keeping the wheat.

Like the parable we studied last week, Jesus offered a detailed explanation of this parable a few verses later. The farmer who sows the good seed is Jesus himself. The field in which he sows the seed is the world...this includes the church, which is a part of the world until Jesus returns. The wheat represents the children of the kingdom and the weeds represent the children of the evil one, (the evildoers, the false believers, false teachers, etc) which are sown by the devil. The servants are the disciples who have volunteered to pull the weeds, but it is the reapers, or the angels, who have been assigned this task.

Certainly one group Jesus intended this parable for are the crusaders in the kingdom, past and present, who feel compelled to identify the weeds within the church (the sinners, the pretenders, false teachers) and pull them out, or remove them from their midst. And his message to them is simple and straightforward, “Don’t do it. It’s not your job. The angels will take care of it.” For the crusaders among us who need more than a command, but an explanation, he offers one.

First of all, we are not as good as we think we are at recognizing the difference between weeds and wheat. Most biblical scholars believe the weed Jesus was referring to was something called a darnel or a cockle. This weed very closely resembles wheat, so much so that has been referred to as “false wheat.” It doesn’t become clearly distinguishable from wheat until the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of real wheat are heavy and will droop, but the ears of this particular weed stand up straight.

It’s not as easy as we like to think it is to differentiate between saints and sinners. Some of the things we think are wrong, may not be wrong in God’s eyes. And we are prone to make assumptions, or cast judgment before knowing all the facts. And we don’t always take into account the fact that we are all at different points in the journey. So what they need from us is patience and grace, not condemnation.

This parable really highlights God’s patience. A day is coming when God will harvest the wheat and burn the weeds, but he is prolonging that day as long as he can, so that as many who will, will receive his gift of salvation. The Biblical term for God’s patience is his long-suffering. We need to be as patient with other as God is with us. A verse from 2 Peter comes to mind, “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2:9).

But that fact remains, there will be times when we know for certain that someone is a weed. But even in those times, we need to be conscious of the collateral damage that could occur if we attempt to pull them out. The chances are good that we could hurt some of the wheat in the process. The explanation given in the parable is that the roots of the two are intertwined.

It’s easy to translate that into terms of people and see what Jesus means. People are relational, we are all connected to one another in some way or another. Every action carried out against one individual has ramifications on other individuals. This is especially true in the Church. We all know people who have left the church entirely because of the way they saw someone else pulling out the weeds.

There are situations when it is necessary to remove someone from the church. There is a Biblical process of handling those kinds of situations, which Jesus lays out for his disciples later in Matthew’s Gospel. It takes much prayer, and discernment, and is never the work of one individual. Even if this process is followed exactly, there is a good chance some people will still leave the church. But if it’s not done correctly, no matter how good our intentions might be, we will be held accountable for the wheat we destroy. That’s not a burden any one would want to bear.

Really, what it all boils down to is that we should let God take care of the God things. We should leave the weeding up to God. Our main concern should be whether or not we are among the weeds or the wheat. But just as we are not really equipped to identify the weeds among us, we are not the best person to identify the weeds in our own hearts. God is. So this parable calls us to introspection, to ask God to continually, to search our hearts, to reveal to us the things that must be rooted out, so that we can be fit for the kingdom.

We know in the real world weeds cannot become wheat, but that's where we have to be careful of understanding the parable too literally. While weeds cannot become wheat, by the grace of God, sinners can become saints. And there is still time, the Lord of the Harvest has not yet sent his angels to do their work...until he does, there is still time to receive the good seed, let it be planted deep in your heart, and bear fruit in your life.

Some of you have lived this parable. You have experienced evil in the church, among people who are supposed to be like Jesus. Or you know someone who has. Someone who refuses to come to church because they have experienced evil at the hands of another Christian, possibly even the pastor.

When I started out as a pastor I don't think I was entirely naïve to the ways of the world. I knew there were bad people out there, who did bad things. But I didn't know there were bad people in "here." By here I don't mean that literally, as in this church, but in the Church in general. I have been hurt, let down, disappointed, and threatened by people in the Church. If you have, I understand your pain. Know this, God is coming again some day. And he will make things right. And he will finally and completely do away with evil. In the meantime, you be faithful. Let God do the rest.