Growing Together

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Saint David’s Episcopal Church, Agawam, MA

Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-11, 22-23; Romans 8:12-25; Matt 13:24-30, 36-43

If you spent any time at Saint David’s last week—and a lot of people did—you know that we had Vacation Bible School. Linda Birk and a host of volunteers worked with nearly twenty children on the amazing grace that God shows to us.

About half of the kids who participated come from the Saint David’s family. They are the kids that we see regularly. For them, VBS is part of their normal Church life. I like to think that they learned good things and had a good time. But VBS is just one part of their Christian formation.

It is different with the other kids. For those children who are not part of Saint David’s, VBS may well be all the Christian formation they get this year.

So we told them that God loves them. We told them that they can turn to Jesus when they are scared or need help. We taught them Bible stories and praise songs. And we hope that some of that sunk in.

But we are doing something else too at VBS. We are trying to show these kids what Christian community can be.

This is not something we talked much about. But my greatest hope for VBS, and this is my hope for our regular children as well as for our visitors, my greatest hope is that they learn to think of Church as a safe space where they are surrounded by love, where they are allowed to be themselves, where they are not judged for who they are.

That is the kind of community we want to be because we all need that kind of community. And that is the kind of community that Christ calls us to be in our gospel reading for this morning.

Jesus says, “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.”

I suspect the people who heard that were confused. We know that the disciples who heard that were confused, because they went and asked Jesus what the parable meant.

Jesus tells them. The sower is Jesus; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; and the weeds are the children of the evil one. So the world is a mixture of the good guys and the bad guys.

If Jesus had stopped there, we might assume that the good guys should all get together and form a Church. Then the good guys could keep all the bad guys out of their Church. That way, the Church could truly be the communion of saints, and the line between the saints and the sinners would be obvious. It would be the Church door.

That seems to be the goal of the slaves in the parable. The slaves offer to get rid of all the weeds, so that only the good seed would be left. The field would be pure. The Church would be pure because it would only have the good seed, the children of the kingdom, the saints.

Of course, the Church would also be mighty small. A Church that is only for the saints would not include me, for one. It might not include many of us.

Thankfully Jesus has a different vision.

Jesus warns the slaves that if they try to gather up the weeds, they will accidentally uproot the wheat as well.

I have never farmed. But I have gardened a little, and Jesus’ warning about the danger of weeding strikes me as odd. One of the main things I did when I gardened was pull weeds.

I am pretty sure that Jesus’ original audience would have been just as surprised by Jesus’ suggestion that they should let weeds grow along with their crops. But that is exactly what Jesus says. “Let both of them grow until the harvest.”

The weeds and the crops grow together. That is the key line of the parable.

Two points about this are important.

First, Jesus does make a distinction between good seed and bad. How we live matters. Do we live as children of God, growing in faith, hope, and love? Or do we turn away from the grace of God in our lives? Do we refuse to love? How we answer that question is a big deal.

But the second point is at least as big a deal. The only one who can separate the good seed from the bad is God. When the slaves offer to get rid of the weeds, Jesus refuses to let them because they will not be able to distinguish good from bad. If they try, they will end up killing the crops they are trying to protect.

Unfortunately I know this firsthand. Our home in Georgia was surrounded by a pretty little wild flower called sorrel. Carrie loved that sorrel. One of our favorite photographs of our children from when they were little was taken in the middle of the sorrel flowers.

One year I went out to weed. The sorrel was not blooming, and it looked a lot like weeds. You know where I am going. I yanked all the sorrel up. It is good that we did not have a gun in the house when Carrie discovered what I had done.

In our gospel reading, Jesus is telling us that it is easy to make that same mistake with people. Some people seem pretty weedy. It is hard to believe that some people are ever going to blossom into a beautiful flower.

But the lesson of the parable is that we cast people out at our peril.

The Church, it turns out, is not a gathering of the pure, good seed that is kept separate from the bad, weedy seed. The Church is a mixture of good and bad growing together. We have neither the capacity to accurately distinguish between good and bad nor the authority to cast out the bad. Church is a place where good and bad grow together.

And all this applies not only to us as a community, but also to each of us as individuals.

I have some good seed in me. But, unfortunately, weeds sprout in my heart all the time. All of us are like that.

The task of Christian formation, the task of the Christian life, is to cultivate the good seed, the capacity to love God and neighbor.

But even the greatest saints still have some weeds. It is good news for us that God graciously includes us despite our weeds so that the good seed in us can continue to grow. And it is a natural extension of that grace for us to be as generous as we possibly can with our neighbors even if they look to us a lot more like weeds than like flowers.

That brings me back to Vacation Bible School. All the children who participated last week were good kids, even the ones who were hardest to keep focused. But even if some of those kids had been more challenging, we would not throw them out. No matter how bad they might seem, our task would still be to love them for the flower they might become as well as for the child of God that they already are. Because that is what it means to be Jesus’ followers. That is what it means to be Church in a morally ambiguous world.

I thank God for calling us into the Church, mixed lot though each of us are. And I thank God for helping us to reflect God’s love as we strive to be the Church God calls us to be. Amen.