

Homily for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 18-19, 2020

Readings: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Romans 8: 26-27; Matthew 13: 24-43

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Sometimes, when life seems to swirl around us in a confusing mess of options, possibilities and potential dangers, we want it simple. Either/or. A or not A. Chocolate or vanilla?

And sometimes life seems more manageable if we discover, or can create, an enemy. At least we've screened out all the distracting and disorienting shades of gray.

Dualisms can look like handy tools for organizing, categorizing and making sense of confusion, and in scientific and mathematical fields they work to a large extent. But in the humanities, dualistic distinctions can conceal hidden assumptions about value. A dualism appears to be a clean, even split—black/white, left/right, male/female, the list goes on endlessly, and then ventures into more obviously value-laden terms: good/evil, nature/nurture, us/them. In each case, if you probe a little, one of the two elements emerges as the more highly valued, better, cleaner or more desirable. A dualistic split misrepresents itself—it's never value-free.

A superficial reading of our Gospel for today can lead us tumbling right down the path of rigid dichotomies, of identifying ourselves with the Good, and our purported enemies with the Bad. If this happens, we lose both the depth and the compelling power of the story that Jesus tells, as well as its energizing messages.

This parable of the weeds among the wheat is found only in Matthew, although it may be a reworking of the parable of the growing seed in Mark. The way this story has been first expanded and then explained tells us a lot about the conditions within Matthew's community of early Christians, and how they saw themselves in their own culture and society. "Harvesting" or "gathering" point to an allegorical interpretation of the story as the gathered community of believers, much as the list of interpretations in verses 36-43 present an application to

different groups of those who hear the Word. Clearly this was the experience of the earliest Christian missionaries, “apostles” in the broadest sense, at the time this Gospel was written.

As an agrarian metaphor this story makes sense when you realize that the “weeds” that were sown among the wheat were probably darnel, which looks very much like young wheat when both are in the initial sprouting stage. Workers could easily root up good wheat, or for that matter leave the darnel in the ground, where it would eventually choke off the wheat and sicken any cattle, sheep or goats that might munch on it. This analogy would be very clear to Jesus’ hearers: leave both to grow until they can be recognized, or more specifically, be patient and allow enough time to distinguish among the various currents in the Christian community, and to discern what would serve and what could damage the community.

One pitfall here would be to say, we Christians will just reject what is “worldly” and claim to be chosen of God—we’re the wheat, everyone and everything else is the darnel. That would result in a paralysis that stops us from living and doing the Word of God here and now. That’s not who we are. That’s not our call.

Ultimately for our ancestors the real polarity was about the radical demands of their new Christian faith and the fact that it set them in direct opposition to the all-powerful Roman Empire. In this sense Christ vs Caesar, or Christ vs Emperor, is another dualism but not far from the mark. Early Christians had to be absolutely sure of their commitment to the faith because it could cost them their lives. This is partly why the catechumenate in Rome lasted several years. The imperial persecution of Christians persisted well into the fourth century.

There’s another message here that rings true today: The Christian community is never without a need for self-examination and housecleaning. The saying that the Church is *semper reformanda*, always in need of reform, is as true now as it was in the 16th century, or for that matter, the Vatican-II era. Yes we need to discern carefully, listen for a time, but then to decide and do the cleaning: “see, judge, act.” What needs to be done today so that the Church can speak with credibility and authenticity, so that all the voices can be heard, so that all peoples

are fully respected as children of God, so that a much-needed message of healing and hope will be proclaimed?