



SUNDAY SERMON

Every Separation is a Link

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 13, verses 24 to 30, and 36 to 43.

Another parable Jesus put before the crowds: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

DATE

The Seventh Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., July 23, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

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

At CVS or Panera, an ATM or at the airport, I walk right up to the blank screen of the monitor. Undaunted by its obviously inanimate appearance I tap the screen, confident that it will leap to life, will guide me to accomplish my desired transaction. I could be in Tenleytown, Caracas or Mumbai. This simple touch connects me to an otherwise inaccessible plane of reality.

Christian Wiman is a favorite contemporary poet of mine. Wiman recounts a passage written by French mystic and political philosopher Simone Weil. "Weil describes two prisoners who are in solitary confinement next to each other. Between them is a stone wall. Over a period of time – and I think we have to imagine it as a very long time – they find a way to communicate using taps and scratches. The wall is what separates them, but it is also the only means they have of communicating. "It is the same with us and God," she says. "Every separation is a link."

That which separates us from God may be the very means of our connection and communion with God: our sense of loss or isolation, of unresolved or seemingly irreconcilable relationships. The homonym 'cleave' means, mysteriously, both to split and to join. Somehow, the medium, the wall, the door, the screen, whatever stands between you and "it" is the means of mediation and meeting.

This assertion – "every separation is a link" – prompts me to wonder, how is it that the thing that separates me can be the means of connection? How can I approach the wall that appears to keep me separate from you, or from God, or from them – pick your "them", any "them"... Am I to approach the wall between us trusting that it is the very means of our connection and relationship?

Continued

I'm not asking this as an abstract or philosophical question. I'm asking it because it seems that everywhere I turn these days, the walls between us are growing harder, the chasms wider, the trenches from which we can assert the rightness of our own position grow deeper. Pick a them, pick an issue – pick race, religion, distribution of wealth, pick our own personal dilemmas or relationships. My heart aches with the sense that despite our proximity, we struggle to see, to hear, to feel, to communicate effectively, reciprocally, deeply.

Jesus challenges us today with a parable that speaks to our relationships with one another. Well before this oppressive heat of mid-summer, picture dark moist earth of early spring, fresh-tilled for planting. We're told that the kingdom of God is like someone who planted good seed in her field, but while she slept an enemy came and planted bad seed – weeds, and both good and bad grew up together.

Slaves came to the landowner and asked if she had not planted good seed and where had these weeds come from? "An enemy has done this," was the reply. "Shall we go then and pull the weeds?" they ask. "No, for the weeds and the wheat are indiscernible, one from the other, and you will accidentally yank the good plants along with the bad. Let them grow. When it is time for harvest, the reapers will be able to tell the difference. They will pull and burn the weeds, and will harvest the wheat."

When Jesus took his disciples aside and explained the parable to them, he made it clear that the field is the world, this life. The good seed are people, good people planted by God. The bad seed are also people, bad people planted by the devil. The harvest, Jesus explains, is the end of the age, and the reapers – who will be able to discern bad from good – are angels.

Immediately, I find myself resisting this story because I am troubled by the proposition that some of us – by our very nature – are good while others are bad. Some, predestined it would seem, to futility and condemnation, and others to fruitfulness and salvation. This resistance may be the point of entry.

Parables, of course, are not bound by logic and are not intended to be taken literally. By design, parables awaken, startle, teach, reveal, prompt us to discover something – about ourselves, about God, our relationship with God.

So, if we accept the image of all of us – wheat and weeds – growing cheek by jowl in this loamy earth of God's great giving... And even if there will be a final judgment, a harvest at the end, who are the one's so anxious to come rifling among us and pluck out the bad? Who is that? The landowner's slaves? Who are they? If you were directing this parable for performance who get's to say those lines, and who is it that feels so reassured and justified when they learn that some of us are going to be judged and it won't be pretty.

Who says it? The voice of judgment. The voice within each of us that looks and measures weeds and wheat, assesses human worth. That's the dominant, pervasive voice in the narrative. I think that voice is the reason for the story. Jesus' parable is designed, I believe, first, to help us notice that voice, and then, to admonish it, to tell it to be still, to be silent. Jesus says, in effect, this business of judging is not for you; it is for God.

Frankly, this is a hard lesson, confounding. I mean, really, are we supposed to sit idly by as the devil sows seeds and mischief and evil are perpetuated in our very own garden?

In a piece this past Tuesday (July 18, 2017), NY Times columnist David Leonhardt addressed this dilemma. "Righteousness comes easily in these polarized times," he wrote. "We all have reasons for our opinions, and we tend to be surrounded by people who hold similar ones. The more we talk politics, the more confident we can become that we're right."

Thus, Leonhardt proposes, "a quieter step that's worth taking... for the sake of nourishing your political soul. Pick an issue that you find complicated, and grapple with it. Read up on it. Don't rush to explain away inconvenient evidence. Then do something truly radical: Consider changing your mind, at least partially." (end quote) In effect, he recommends we move toward, not away from, that which is the source or cause of our division. And to do so in a spirit of receptivity – trusting that the separation offers a link.

It's a good recommendation, one I intend to follow, but it's not what Jesus is saying. Leonhardt's solution is an intellectual one. Jesus' parable causes us to confront our own limits.

Jesus is asking us not to fix anything. Jesus is asking us to see and to sit with the tension of things as they really are – that we judge others, even though they're just like us. And, to acknowledge that it is not for any one of us to judge the other; our knowledge of them is not true. And, that we're all striving, growing the best we can. We cannot fix it all.

Rather, with Jesus' invitation, as so often in our practice of faith, if we sit quietly in prayer and name the tension – within ourselves, and seek to be still, to trust that God has this, that God's love and wisdom is beyond our comprehension... and to be tender with ourselves, we can live this day with a deeper sense of grace and gratitude. In this great field of God's plenty and love, there is room for every growing, living thing, all in there together, drinking up the moisture, basking in the sun. Growing side by side, separate yet linked. Reach across the divide. Let your leaves, tendrils, even roots entwine, in God's peace.

