

ECHOING GOD'S WORD
JULY 19, 2020
SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

SCRIPTURES:

Wisdom 12:13-19	God does not exclude any nation from his love.
Romans 8:26-27	The Holy Spirit speaks to God from within us.
Matthew 13:24-43	God allows the weeds to stay until harvest time.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

Matthew presents the teachings of Jesus in five major discourses. We are in the midst of the Third Discourse: Teaching in Parables (Chapter 13). Three parables (Wheat Among Weeds, Mustard Seed, Yeast in the Leaven) are given to us today.

According to [William Barclay](#), parables (1) make a truth concrete by turning it into a picture, (2) begin from *here* and *now* to lead to *then* and *there*, (3) compel our interest by the storytelling technique, (4) give the listener a flash of truth, (5) place responsibility for accepting the truth squarely on the shoulders of the listener. That is why Jesus can say that those who have closed their hearts to his message will not *be able to hear and be saved*. A parable reveals the truth to those who seek it and conceals the truth from those who reject it (vv. 34-35).

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is addressed by Jesus to the Pharisees who hold themselves separate from sinners so as not to be contaminated by them. Matthew wants the Church of his day to hear that they should not judge those whom they may consider unworthy: Gentiles, weak-willed members, women, and other socially unacceptable persons.

The community of faith finds itself made up of the good and the bad, a “mixed bag” of individuals. It will be that way until the end of the world, up to the time of the divine “harvest.” Only God has the right to pass judgment. I find it encouraging that God does not judge nor exclude anyone until the very end, when all have been given an adequate chance to change and to grow. Would that the Church today could be as tolerant; would that all the members of the Church, the mighty and the humble too, allowed others to be themselves, calling all to renewal and to spiritual growth through repentance and conversion, rather than through condemnation and excommunication.

The rank and file members of the Church can be just as effective as the leaders in “excommunicating” someone they do not like! I know when I have been *dismissed* by people who thought they were superior. God knows, I have been guilty of doing the same!

The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Yeast offer a special twist in the teachings of Jesus. I am persuaded that we have not really captured the full meaning of these two parables because we have not understood the very *negative* notion that ancient people attached both to the mustard plant and to yeast. Just ask any farmer even today what he/she thinks the value of mustard plants to be. “Nothing but a pest! Who can see any value in it except the Creator of the universe?” As a youth, I spent many days in potato fields and in fields of oats pulling out mustard plants so they would not overshadow the good crop and suck the useful nutrients from the soil. Now, of course, farmers use chemicals for weed management. Jesus’ point is not that we should allow our crops to be destroyed by weeds but that we should not apply the same strategy to Church purity!

Yeast, too, is a negative element: it contaminates and destroys the bread that was meant to be unleavened, causing it to spoil.

Wisdom:

Writing originally in Greek (and therefore not included in “Protestant Bibles”) perhaps around the year 60 BCE, just before the time of Christ, a Greek-speaking Jew in Egypt calls upon his fellow Jews to be faithful to the Lord and to their particular heritage even in the midst of an alien culture and a hostile society. In the passage given us today, the author digresses a moment to remind his readers that God loves all the people that he has made; God does not despise nor does God reject any nation. God is open to the possibility that any person or any group might come to know and serve the truth. The Christian community hears this message as a call to tolerance of those who are different from ourselves, as a summons to inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

Romans:

In Chapter 8, Paul continues to describe the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Christian people. Here, he asserts that it is actually the Spirit within us that speaks to God when we are at prayer. How can mere human beings find the appropriate words with which to address the Most High? Well, not to fear; the Spirit will call out to the Father from within our hearts! The word Paul uses here again (as earlier in the chapter) is the Greek word for “groaning.” Whereas the whole universe is “groaning” in its need for God (Romans 8:22), now we ourselves “groan” up toward God in our yearning for salvation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you have a sense that your parish (or prayer group) is optimistic and generous with the “seed” it has been given? Do your people scatter the seed far and wide, with no care as to where it may fall? Or are you selective in avoiding areas or persons you do not consider appropriate for receiving it?
2. In what ways do you consider yourself to be a “seed” sown by the Lord in that place where you live? Have you been given by the Lord to this family, to this parish, to this particular place where you work, so that you will become like a mustard tree or like yeast in the leaven?
3. What would you do with the people in your family or in your parish who are not really productive of good results? Do you tend to uproot them and exclude them from the community? Have you ever had to ask one of your children to leave home because his/her behavior had become destructive to the rest of the family?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Take a look around the parish or the family this week to see if there is a person who has been excluded from the fellowship. Do one small thing to show personal friendship in the name of Christ.

PRAYER

*Hearken, O Lord, to my prayer
and attend to the sound of my pleading.
You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in kindness and fidelity.
Turn toward me and have pity on me;
give your strength to your servant.*

(From Psalm 86)

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

There are times when the Church would cleanse itself of sinners and dissidents and all those judged unworthy of fellowship. Then, there are times when the Church seems to tolerate the good and the bad in an effort to win over the bad!

Have you ever seen a solemn excommunication from the Church as it was practiced in Medieval Europe? Watch the film *Becket* sometimes. There is a scene where the archbishop gathers his monks in the Cathedral of Canterbury and proceeds to a solemn excommunication of the sheriff of London who had arrested a priest against the reservations of Church law. Becket says, "I exclude you from the fellowship of God's family on earth. I exclude you from the fellowship of God's family in heaven. I consign you to the fires of hell for all eternity."

The monks turn their lighted candles upside down and snuff out the flames on the stone floor of the sanctuary and throw the candles to the ground as a sign that the divine life of resurrection has ceased to shine in the life of that sheriff. Now, that represents power!

Does the Church have this kind of power? If it does, when should it be used?

Church law specifies that penalties, as provided for in the law, have a medicinal purpose: they are meant to heal, to bring about conversion, a change of heart and repentance. Neither pope nor bishops in the Church today want to "consign anyone to the fires of hell for all eternity." Some bishops have made a pastoral judgment, for the good of the faith community, that certain persons have placed themselves outside the fellowship by some behaviors that are seriously harmful to the Church and its members. Many people would question the wisdom of these pastoral decisions.

In a parish, no priest or pastoral worker, no religious education teacher, no parish secretary has the power to exclude anyone from the fellowship of the Church. Sometimes, in the expression of our disapproval for certain behaviors, we end up alienating people from the Church. We have made it difficult for divorced Catholics to feel welcome in the community of faith, especially if they have remarried outside the Church. Sometimes, the poor feel out of place in our Sunday assemblies where the upwardly mobile parade around in the latest fashions. Or, are we too "educated" these days for the average person to feel at home at our liturgies?

© 2017 Rev. Clement D. Thibodeau. All rights reserved.