

Proper 11 (A) – July 17, 2011
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
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Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
Asleep!

The people were sound asleep, but they thought they were wide awake. After all, they were at the circus.

What they didn't know was that a raging fire had broken out back stage right before the first circus troupe was scheduled to perform. In the midst of the turmoil, the stage manager hastily commanded one of the performers – a clown in full costume – to make the emergency announcement to the capacity crowd. Unfortunately, the people seeing the fully-outfitted clown take the stage thought his announcement was all part of a warm-up circus act, and the more he screamed and waved his hands, the more they doubled over with laughter... until the fire engulfed them.

That's not my story. It is Søren Kierkegaard's (d. 1855), the highly creative 19th century Danish existentialist philosopher.¹ His Christian literary originality, in my mind, has only been matched by Flannery O'Connor (d. 1964), who wrote in America's Deep South during the first half of the 20th century. Kierkegaard's story is rife with harrowing symbolism. For example, those in the crammed auditorium are symbolic of the people in our world, and the world is on fire – both during Kierkegaard's day and ours! There is war around every corner of the globe, predatory crime of every variety, injustice of every stripe, economic fallout in those counties everyone thought to be the most stable, and yet, everywhere we turn there is a growing indifference to escalating human need. Deliverance enters stage-right pointing "the Way" to the exit – but the people are sleeping (Acts 9:2).

Kierkegaard's clown is the Christian who has been sent to deliver the people from a world set afire. Quite unexpectedly, the cranky Danish philosopher accuses the Christians themselves of snoozing. We Christians are asleep to our pressing call from Christ and, instead, play the clown. We go through the motions, raise our voices ever more loudly, but are dismissed as phonies by those who have a burning need for the Good News. You see, I am not only talking about pointing "the Way" to exit from hell (John 14:6), I am saying that Christians are the only hope for putting the fire out in this

¹ Søren Kierkegaard as told by Edward T. Oakes, SJ "Irreducible Faith," *Christian Century*: July 12, 2011.

world that's been set ablaze with evil and pain...but we have to be the genuine article for people to hear us (Matthew 5:16).

In that respect, Kierkegaard's 19th century parable squares with Jesus' Parable of the Wheat and Weeds. Jesus begins this puzzling story much like the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The plots of these parables "grow" once the farmer plants some seed (Matthew 13:1-9; 13:31-32). However, this parable takes a dark turn when the farmer's enemy slips into the field during the shadow of night and sows weeds amongst his rows of wheat. Later, when the plants just start pushing their green heads up through the soil, the farmer's employees see that weeds are sprouting right next to the wheat (Matthew 13:24-29).

Indignant, the hired hands ask their employer, "Boss, do you want us to take our hoes and mattocks and get after those weeds in your field?" Surprisingly, the farmer tells them to hold off for while, for at this early juncture it would be easy for them to uproot the wheat along with the weeds. "Let them grow together until harvest time," he says, "and then we will gather the weeds into big bundles and set them on fire" (Matthew 13:30-35).

The crowds leave Jesus at this point, no doubt shaking their heads in confusion. Jesus retires from the prow of the boat where he has been teaching and goes into the house. The twelve at once pounce on Jesus to decipher the parable. Jesus tells them that the "field is the world," which in the Greek is cosmos – meaning all of humanity. The sower or the farmer is the Son of Man, Jesus, and he plants the good seed – the righteous persons in our midst who are actually "living" the Good News. The weeds are those people who have been deceived and disfigured by evil. These "weedy" people are growing and living right alongside the righteous folks (Matthew 13:36-39)... So there goes the neighborhood!

In an exasperating turn, Jesus chooses not to elaborate on the most puzzling part of the parable. Why doesn't the farmer just send in his army of laborers and clear out the weeds from the get-go? Voicing the disciples' nagging question and ours, Ken Schmidt exclaimed loudly on Tuesday morning Bible study, "Us weeds want to know!" According to Bill Scheel, those ancient Palestinians peasants who gathered around Jesus would have known that early on in the growing cycle "darnel" – those weeds prevalent in the wheat crops of that Middle Eastern region – could not be distinguished from the stalks of wheat surrounding them until harvest time. Yet Ken's question was directed on a more personal level, for every Christian knows he or she has been a "weed in process"!

Thankfully, this parable, which seems to be primarily about severe judgment directed against the world– that is “gathering up and burning huge heaps of weeds” – is actually about grace (Matthew 13:30, 42; see also John 3:16-17). The grace of God given through Jesus permeates the field and can transform into good what was of no use except as fuel for the fire. Weeds can be transformed into wheat! Saint Augustine (d. 430), who could certainly lapse into judgment, said as much: “There is a difference between people and real grain and real weeds, for what was grain in the field is grain and what were weeds are weeds. But in the Lord’s field, which is the Church, at times what was grain turns into weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain; and no one knows what they will be tomorrow.”²

If anything, this parable is judgment directed at us Christians. Grace most usually works through us – like good seed in a field. We grow wherever we are planted, and the good fruit of our lives becomes apparent to all those living and growing next to us (Matthew 7:17-20). We have been given the power to douse the fire of evil in our communities and lead people to higher ground. But to do that we must quit clowning around and live the message Christ has planted within us, and that will take some inner-courage.

I can tell you what that inner-courage looks like. Some months ago, I was asked by a Christian leader in another town to celebrate a House Blessing for a young family. I thought that an unusual request until he told me that their teenage son in the family, a high school junior, had committed suicide, and the family was desperately trying to put their lives back together – especially with another son in college and a daughter who was a high school freshman. On the appointed night, we marched from room to room celebrating together with lots of their friends of all ages, and there were loads of tears and some laughter sown in too.

Just last Tuesday, I visited my friend and asked how that family was doing. He told me that they decided to attend graduation at the local high school this past May, which was really hard because this was their dead son’s graduating class. Seeing their son’s peers march across the stage, receive their diplomas and head out into a bright future made them fight back choking sobs in order to offer smiles and congratulations to others. What’s more, the mother has continued giving an entire month each summer without pay to serve at a teen youth camp. The father is leading father-son fishing and hunting outings to support Young Life in his community. The younger daughter just completed

² Augustine, Semon 73 A.I. from Matthew: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 277.

serving as a summer missionary in Bolivia. They decided to put themselves right in the middle of others who may be confused, lost, or without hope.

The darkness could have easily eclipsed them due to the sorrow sown in their hearts, and the weeds choked the life out of them. Instead, they stepped back out onto the great stage of life themselves in order to grow next to others and show them how to rise from their sleep and wake-up to grace (Ephesians 5:14-16).