

A woman was sitting in the waiting room for her first appointment with a new dentist. She noticed his Dental School Diploma, which bore his full name. Suddenly, she remembered a tall, handsome, dark-haired boy with the same name who had been in her high school class some 50+ years ago. Could he be the same guy that she had a secret crush on, way back then? Upon seeing him, however, she quickly discarded any such thought. A pot-bellied, balding, gray-haired man with a deeply lined face was way too old to have been her classmate. After he had examined her teeth, she asked him if he had attended Morgan Park High School. "Yes. Yes, I did. I'm a Mustang," he gleamed with pride. "When did you graduate?" the woman asked. He said, "In 1965. Why do you ask?" "You were in my class!" she exclaimed. He looked at her closely, and asked, "What did you teach?"

We make judgments all of the time. Sometimes pretty harmless, like that woman, sometimes more serious. Let's dig into this gospel text a bit. Scholars suggest that opposition to Jesus probably occasioned this parable of seeds and weeds and growth. The master charges that an enemy has sown weeds into the wheat, but oddly the master's only main action is to restrain the servants' desire to root up the weeds then and there, telling them to do so would put the good wheat at risk. The master orders them to let both grow together until the harvest, at which time he will send workers to destroy the weeds and to gather the wheat.

Like any good parable, this one evokes questions: Why does a good God allow evil to flourish? Do we as disciples of a good God have a responsibility to take matters in hand and root out evil? The master restrains the servants' rooting-out impulse, explaining that it's difficult to tell the good plants from the bad. Besides, in uprooting the evil, the roots of good and evil may be intertwined, and we are apt to do more harm than good.

It's not up to the servants to solve the problem of the weeds; GOT THAT? It's not our job to solve the problem of the weeds in our church and world! The harvesters will handle that later when the good will be blessed and the bad thrown away. Now this parable is frequently interpreted to see that the church is a mess, and we ought not attempt to make distinctions between good and bad, faithful and unfaithful, but rather agree to go along in order to get along with the mess that is the church. And that's part of it. Matthew's gospel is sometimes called 'the gospel of the church.' But many times, Matthew makes clear that God's judgments will be a shock to us, and we are all apt to have our roots entangled with those who are 'bad seed,' and we may even have grown in our faith and fruitfulness because of their presence in our lives. Thank goodness the Lord of the harvest has postponed the separation until we've had enough time to grow in our faith, prodded on by those whom we judged to be merely 'bad seed,' to be reminded that there is only one Lord who is not only judge of all but savior as well, and remember that the bad seed sometimes is us. So there's a lot going on here.

Second, a word about us, the church. Take our congregation. "Please take our congregation!" we say on some days! Generally we like our church, or we wouldn't stay. Here we meet God, we try to grow in faith, gather to hear God's word and receive the Body and Blood of Christ, care for each other, and move out in mission to serve the wider world. Yet for all of that, we must, in our more honest moments, admit that we are a very mixed bag. We are a mix of saints and sinners. We have some of the best people in the world and we've got some of the ....well, I think we get the picture.

How did a good, loving, righteous God manage to convene such a mixed bag of folks? Could an all-knowing God not have been a bit more knowledgeable about our true moral and spiritual natures? Could not God have been a bit more selective when He was composing this congregation? Couldn't He have at least

made it with just all good people – you know – the ones who agree with me who are the only ones who really love Jesus!

I know what you're thinking: *"Couldn't God have been a bit more selective when the Bishop sent this jerk to be our pastor?"* Well, you know you ain't exactly a box of chocolates some days either! Which reminds me – when I was leaving St. Thomas More in Chapel Hill a lady came up to me and said, "Oh, Fr. John, I just hate to see you leave." "Oh, don't worry," I said. "The Bishop will send you a wonderful pastor that you will grow to love." "I don't think so," she said adamantly. "I've been here for 6 different pastors – AND EACH ONE WAS WORSE THAN THE LAST!" Well, don't let the door hit you on your sweet little pattooti on the way out!

The master tells us to work with whomever He drags in the door. He apparently loves to see stuff grow. Crabgrass and kudzu are apparently beautiful, if we look at them in the right way. At least that's a nice, pious thought. As a pastor I confess that sometimes I run out of patience with difficult people in the church. More than once when some difficult person has said, "That's it. I'm leaving this church," I have thought to myself. "Good riddance. One fewer nutcase to deal with. Now if we could just get a few more out of here, this could be a great parish!" Yeah, I need to hear this parable too – and go to confession too.....

No, Jesus says, "Let the weeds live alongside the wheat. I'll sort it all out later." Tolerance. Forbearance. Patience. These are critical virtues in God's garden of the church. And the problem is that we all assume that WE are the wheat, and someone ELSE is the weed. No. We all have our time when we are weed and time when we are wheat. We are all a mixed bag, so why would we expect the church to be any different? (All of this adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2017, p. 12-13)

Third, some application of this. Obviously, I work within church circles – and most of the people I meet are honest, committed, and for the most part, radiate their faith positively. Most church-goers are trying NOT to be hypocrites. What is disturbing though is that too many of us can be bitter, angry, mean-spirited, and judgmental, especially in terms of the very values that we hold most dear.

It was Henri Nouwen who first highlighted this, commenting that many of the really angry, bitter, and ideologically driven people he knew he had met inside the church. Within the church, it sometimes seems, everyone is angry about something. Moreover, it is all too easy to rationalize our anger in the name of being a prophet, a person with a healthy passion for truth and morals. The logic works this way: Because I am sincerely concerned about an important moral, church, or justice issue, I can excuse a certain amount of anger, criticism and judgment, because I can rationalize that my cause, dogmatic or moral, is so important that it justifies my mean spirit: I need to be this angry and harsh because this is such an important truth or issue. And we can end up seeing ourselves as warriors for God, truth, and morals, when, in fact, we are mostly just struggling with our own wounds, insecurities, and fears. Hence we often look at others, even whole churches made up of sincere persons trying to live the gospel, and instead of seeing brothers and sisters struggling, like us, to follow Christ, we see 'people in error,' 'dangerous relativists,' 'new age pagans,' 'religious flakes,' and in our more generous moments, 'poor misguided souls.' But never do we look at what this kind of judgment is saying about us, about our own health of soul and our own following of Jesus.

Don't get me wrong: truth is not relative, moral issues are important, and right truth and proper morals, like kingdoms under perpetual siege, need to be defended. Not all moral judgments are created equal, neither are all churches.

But the truth of that does not trump everything else or give us an excuse to rationalize our anger. We must defend truth, defend those who cannot defend themselves, and be solid in the traditions of our church. But right truth and right morals don't necessarily make us disciples of Christ. What does?

What makes us genuine disciples of Christ is living inside His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, and this is not something abstract or vague. I've referred to this passage many times. I've memorized it – that's the easy part – but I'll spend a lifetime trying to live it out. It's all spelled out clearly in Chapter 5 of Galatians, where St. Paul makes it very clear what living in the spirit of the flesh looks like: anger, bitterness, judgment of our neighbor, factionalism, and non-forgiveness. But living in the Spirit of Christ gives us "love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, mildness, and self-control." If these do not characterize our lives, we should not nurse the illusion that we are on the path of holiness or that we are living inside of God's Spirit.

This may be a cruel thing to say, and perhaps more cruel not to say, but I sometimes see more love, joy, peace, patience, and understanding among persons who are Unitarian or New Age – who are often judged by other churches as being wishy-washy and as not standing for anything – than I see among those of us who do stand up so strongly for certain church and moral issues – but are often mean-spirited and bitter. Given the choice of whom I'd like as a neighbor, or, more deeply, the choice of whom I want to spend eternity with, I am sometimes pretty conflicted about the choice: Who is my real faith companion? The angry zealot or bitter moralizer? Or the more gentle soul who is branded wishy-washy or 'new age'? At the end of the day, who is the real Christian?

This weed and wheat thing has lots of consequences and implications. As T.S. Eliot once said: "The last temptation that's the greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reason." We may have truth and right morals on our side, but our anger and judgments toward those who don't share our understanding may well find us standing outside the Father's house, like the older brother of the prodigal son, bitter both at God's mercy and at those who are receiving that mercy. We could all pray "I know that I'm a weed, Lord, help me to be more of a wheat. Amen." (Last section adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 7/20/2017)