

Living into Our Baptism

Preached on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Feb. 6, 2022
Text: Matt. 13: 24-30; 36-43; Col. 3: 9-10; 12-17

In our Gospel today we encounter the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, the latter meaning what we today call “weeds.” This is another teaching of Jesus using an agricultural metaphor to get his meaning across. This is unsurprising, given the intimate connection the vast majority of humanity has had with the land, both then and now. It is only quite recently that so many people living in affluent countries could know next to nothing about farming. But the world of the 1st Century is quite different. Hence, Jesus makes many references to planting, cultivating, and harvesting throughout his ministry. The upcoming Sundays of Septuagesima and Sexagesima also have readings referencing agriculture.

It is common for many Christians to read this parable and assume Jesus is talking about the “Saved” vs. “those pretending to be.” If you come from a conservative Evangelical upbringing, this parable might cause some worry. Since at least the 1970’s most of American Evangelicalism has defaulted to a Dispensationalist view of the End Times, which includes, among other things, a belief in a pre-Tribulation Rapture, when all true Christians will be taken to heaven prior to the seven-year Great Tribulation, after which Christ will return. Most every person exposed to this idea as a youngster, perhaps through the *Left Behind* books and movies or earlier popular level Christian media, such as *The Late, Great, Planet Earth* or *A Thief in the Night*, has had the experience of coming home from school, expecting the family to be there, and when they’re not, immediately thinks, “Oh, no! Did I miss the Rapture? Was I one of those who wasn’t ready?” In other words, this poor child wonders whether or not he’s truly a Christian, truly saved.

Or, perhaps that approach to the End Times is foreign to you. After all, this has not been a historic teaching among Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, or the Reformed. But chances are you’ve had a not dissimilar experience where you see a scandal in the Church, or see a Christian behaving badly, or maybe catch yourself behaving badly, and wonder how someone calling themselves a Christian can be so wicked, and again question how you can know if you are truly saved.

Wherever you lie on the Christian Anxiety Scale, there will be some concern about your salvation. And why not? It is of the highest importance. But we need to be careful about forcing our late-Modern worries on the Bible, as if it were custom designed for our often peculiar view of the Faith. With that in mind, let’s look at Jesus’s explanation of this parable, found shortly after our Gospel lesson.

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He

answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matt. 13: 36-43)

Let’s unpack this a bit. The first thing we should notice is that the field in this parable is the world, not the Church. If you’re recovering from certain theologies, you probably have read this parable scores of times and missed that little detail. Many have always assumed that this was teaching about true and false conversions, but it’s actually a teaching about the Church *in* the world. This tells us that the world belongs to God. Sin and the devil are trespassers in God’s good creation. Though they’re working their wickedness now, when the time is right, God will send his angels to sort everything out.

Nevertheless, the parable does indeed say that the tares were sown *among* the wheat. That does imply that among the visible Church will be folks who are not the adopted children of God but are spiritually children of Satan. And we all know people who name the Name of Christ but show no fruits of regeneration. We all know baptized people who are no different than pagans. So, what do we do with that? The *Book of Common Prayer* treats the issue with what has often been called a “generous assumption.” We see this in what is said in both the baptismal and funeral rites. At the end of the Rite of Holy Baptism, for example (page 280 in the Prayer Book), we find two striking statements by the priest:

Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate, and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church, let us give thanks unto Almighty God for these benefits; and with one accord make our prayers unto him, that this Child may lead the rest of his [or her] life according to this beginning.

And later, after the Lord’s Prayer:

We yield thee hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this child with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for thine own Child, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church. And humbly we beseech thee to grant, that he, being dead unto sin, may live unto righteousness, and being buried with Christ in his death, may also be partaker of his resurrection; so that finally, with the residue of thy holy Church, he may be an inheritor of thine everlasting kingdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

We see, then, that all who are baptized are regenerate, are indeed assumed to be wheat, but we also pray and hope that this will bear out to be true, with the proper fruit of a Christian life.

But is this “generous assumption” of the Prayer Book *presumption*? Not really. For those who participate in the household of God have regular access to the biblical means of grace. In other words, those who have been adopted as children of God and brought into the visible Church should be hearing God’s Word read and proclaimed and should be receiving the Sacraments. They should be hearing God’s Law that convicts of sin and God’s Gospel that rescues us from it, being given the constant invitation and opportunity for repentance and the assurance of God’s love and goodness. By coming to Church, as promised in the baptismal vows, we will be positioned to have our hearts changed by the Holy Spirit as he uses the Word and Sacrament for his purposes. And we can indeed trust that the Holy Spirit will indeed use the Word and Sacrament to convict, assure, and regenerate because he has promised in Scripture so to do.

Sometimes, though, this process is less than obvious. This is the second thing we should notice: The Master doesn’t let his servants immediately uproot the weeds, “lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.” We can all be thankful that God is not a compulsive weeder! The Greek word for “weed” used in this passage likely refers to a rye grass with poisonous black seeds, often called darnel. It looks very similar to wheat when the plant is young, but is easily distinguished at the mature stage. Taking up this observation, St. Jerome writes:

Between wheat and weeds there is something called darnel, when the plant is in its early growth and there is no stalk yet. It looks like an ear of corn, and the difference between them is hardly noticeable. The Lord therefore advises us that we should not be quick to judge what is doubtful, but leave judgment up to God. So when the day of judgment comes, he may not cast out from the body of saints those who are suspected of misdeeds but those who are obviously guilty.

We all stumble, and often fall. But we are now in God’s household, where grace and the opportunity to repent is always present. Assurance that we belong to God is found by referring continually to our baptism, not by seeking some dazzling certainty through endless introspection. That way does lead to anxiety. We end up “wrapped around our own axel,” as a spiritual mentor once told me. If you are uncertain about your salvation—good! This should prompt you to get out of your pup tent in the yard, where you have fruitlessly ruminated for years, and come into the Big House. When you get there, say “What can I do?” “Where can I be of service?” The Church needs you. Her members can help you find who you are in Christ.

In a very important way, Christian faith is simply living into your baptism. So start acting like you are a member of God’s household! Put on Christ, and live his life in the way only you can. Start acting like a Christian and you will more and more become one. This is why in Colossians 3, just before our Epistle reading, St Paul urges us to “put off the

old self with its practices and...put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (verses 9,10). As we practice holiness in community, as we set aside the world, the flesh, and the devil, we do indeed change, assisted and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Perseverance in the faith is no easy task, and we could not do it without Grace. But God is faithful and has sent the Spirit, as well as each other, for this purpose. Our Lord Jesus did not leave us orphans. We can trust in God’s goodness. We can come to him assured by the Word and by the Sacraments—not presuming, but assured.

And finally, notice to whom Jesus explains the parable: to his disciples who followed him. Jesus left and the crowds didn’t follow. But the disciples did. Those who were his came with him. The weeds didn’t follow Jesus into the house, but the wheat did. The evidence for being wheat, being “sons of the kingdom,” was the fact that they wanted Jesus to explain the parable. See, the World thinks that Jesus was simply a good guy who told us to be nice to each other, but they don’t really get his teaching. Sons of the world, sons of the enemy, don’t actually listen to Jesus. They never wonder whether they are wheat or tares. They never look to Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection for their salvation, because they don’t see the need to be saved. This is the very heart of presumption.

But if you worry about being presumptuous when it comes to God’s promises, that’s evidence that you’re not. Indeed, this is when the Lord points you back to your baptism. This is when the Lord invites you to his Table. This is when the Lord quickens his Word within you and does indeed give you ears to hear and eyes to see. Stay on this path, and one day you will indeed shine like the sun in the kingdom of your heavenly Father.

In the Name