Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 13:24-43

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 7-19-20

In my almost twenty-five years of preaching, I don't think there's been a text from Scripture that's caused me more "holy heart- burn" or more "wicked whip lash" than our Gospel text for this morning – the parable from the 13th chapter of Matthew which tradition has named the "Parable of the Wheat and the Tares." And I say this because (repeatedly) just when I think I've settled on what seems to be at the heart of the parable, something in the story **yanks** me in another direction, commanding my attention and demanding another look at what the parable is really trying to say…

We always read this text from Matthew sometime in mid-summer, as every three years it's appointed on a Sunday part-way through the season of Pentecost. And so one year, in an attempt to say what I thought the parable was trying to say, I traveled the highways, the byways and the gardens of the Blue Hill Peninsula, gathering for a sermon illustration a vase full of blossoms, arranging into **one exquisite bouquet** an assortment of wild weeds and cultivated garden flowers, **all** of them so beautiful the classification of "weed" and "not-weed" would have been hard to make…

(And you'll know what I mean when I tell you that in amongst garden-grown Dahlias, peonies, poppies, and Blue Iris, I placed wild-sown Black-eyed Susans, Queen Anne's Lace, Goldenrod and Daisies…)

And then using that beautiful mix of "weeds" and "not-weeds" as a sermon illustration, I suggested that the parable of the Wheat and the Tares is a warning to its listeners not to take their weed-whackers to what they **think** are weeds, because sometimes it's hard to tell a weed from a "not weed"… Meaning, in the context of community life and human relations, the parable warns us not to try to rid ourselves of those among us we deem to be weeds, because, well, we may not always be accurate in our judgment…

It was a **beautiful** sermon with its **beautiful** bouquet of blossoms gracing the front of the sanctuary and its **beautiful** message about putting down our weed-whackers in case in our haste we mistake a cultivated flower for a weed…

But even as I gave the sermon I realized it wasn't true to what lives at the heart of the parable, because, in part, as I remembered, Jesus' parables were (are) intended to pull the rug

right out from underneath their listeners… to challenge all of their preconceived ideas… to leave them reeling and disoriented and wondering if there's any solid ground on which to stand anywhere… I remembered Jesus' parables were (are) intended to be "spiritual hand grenades" as one theologian has put it…

And the trouble with my **beautiful** sermon on that **beautiful** summer morning was that in its "Hallmark whitewashing" of the text, it left all the **beautiful** little Lutherans gathered for worship that morning (including me), intact… secure of our place in the story, and grateful for the gentle reminder that in the spirit of God's grace, **we, the cultivated flowers,** were to put our weed whackers down, to be patient with the weeds that might be in our presence, and to let God do the judging at a later time…

It was in part, the **unsettling** reminder of the **unsettling** purpose of Jesus' parables that yanked my attention in another direction, and got me to recognize the inadequacy of my **beautiful** sermon that morning… And along with it the realization that this portion of the 13th chapter of Matthew is **anything but beautiful** with all of its talk about the devil, sin, evil- doers, reapers, the furnace of fire, weeping, and the gnashing of teeth…

Not to mention the fact that the weeds to which Jesus referred in his parable were "tares" T-A-R-E-S… perverse, pernicious, and evil weeds, that once they get into a field of wheat with their deep and pervasive roots, threaten everything healthy and life-giving…

The thing is, when Matthew told this story to his early Christian community in the late first century, there were deep divisions in the community about which aspects of Judaism were to remain central, as some of the old forms (historically, theologically, and culturally so important to the faith), were being challenged by the stories, the teachings and the up-sidedown, subversive and radical ways of the Jesus movement… Those divisions causing the "progressives" in the community to see the "traditionalists" as "evil", and the "traditionalists" to see the "progressives" as evil … folks from each camp seeing folks in the other camp as "threats" to the very life-blood of the community, the very heart of the faith… And causing each side to imagine completely justifiable reasons for eradicating those "evil tares" from the "good wheat"…

It was into this hotbed of animosity that Matthew told the story of Jesus' telling the parable of the wheat and the tares to those in the Jewish community of Jesus' day with weedwhackers in their hands… This hand-grenade of a parable with its challenging, disorienting, impossible demand to let the tares grow right alongside the wheat until harvest time, for fear that in weed-whacking the tares too early, the wheat too would be lost…

It's hard to fathom really, what the parable would have sounded like to those listening in Jesus' day, as well as to those listening in Matthew's day… this parable that says the kingdom of

God is like the community of faith in which all weed-whackers have been put aside, and where wheat and tares grow side-by-side until the kingdom of God dawns in all its fullness…

It's hard to fathom what the parable would have sounded like unless we too have at one time or another felt like taking the weed whacker to the tares in our own field, no doubt for very justifiable reasons… It's hard to fathom what the parable would have sounded like unless, in a similar circumstance, or in the memory of a similar circumstance, we allow the parable do its work on us…

In which case I think something else begins to come clear… which it did for me once when the community at Redeemer Lutheran Church went through a devastating time of division, and I saw one day, when I looked in the mirror, the biggest most pernicious and hatefilled tare you'd ever hope **not** to see… that tare in the mirror suddenly focusing my attention on the explanation of the parable in verses 36-43 where it speaks about how the weeds will be gathered up at the end of the age and thrown into the furnace of fire where there will weeping and gnashing of teeth… And causing me to wonder what in the world those words might mean for me…

Causing me to wonder how in the world to square this **impossible** and **terrifying** text from Matthew with the three words that live at the heart of our faith… These words…. "God is love"….

A question with which I may wrestle till the end of my days, but for which I have found some helpful insights in a memory from the "family field" in which I was raised…

So in the "family field" in which I was raised, I was taught to see our small clan as a field full of beautiful Swedish wheat (to use our metaphor for this morning)… a field full of beautiful Swedish wheat made up of a mother, a father, a sister, grandparents, and a great aunt and uncle, all of us lovely, life-giving, generous, thoughtful, and blessed in every way except for the presence of my mother's brother Eric, his wife Dee and their five children, all of whom were most definitely the tares in the family…

Although I'm not sure what got us started on seeing them as the "family weeds," I think it had to do with money. And then just escalated into the Swedish way of waging war which involves huge silences, stony hearts, cold shoulders and submerged rage…

All of it made even worse when Eric asked my mother, a violinist, if he could have the family violin made by a Swedish friend so one of his children could learn to play… Never mind that my mother had already started me on a half-size violin, with the understanding that someday the full-size family violin would be mine…

Except that it never was. Because when I was ready for a full-sized violin and my mother asked Eric if we could have the family violin back, he refused to give it to her… never mind that none of his kids ended up studying the violin after all…

And then you add that to Eric's refusal to come and visit my mother during the two years she was dying of ALS and the hundred other times he made my mother cry… Well, maybe you can see how there was nothing I would rather have done than to take a weed whacker to him and the rest of his little "tares"….

After my mother died, and my grandparents too had passed, there was no reason to maintain any semblance of relationship with Eric and his family, and so my sister and my father and I just let it go… not the anger of course…. not the resentment, not the desire to do a thorough job of weed-whacking… but the relationship… **That** we let go of…

And then seventeen years later, on June 6, 1997, on the happy occasion of my ordination to the ministry, my small family gathered at the Catholic cathedral in Worcester, MA to celebrate the happy day. (The Catholics are always generous in their welcome to us Lutherans for such occasions)… And as I walked up the steps to the cathedral, I was shocked to see standing there, on the top step, my Uncle Eric and my Aunt Dee. (To this day, no one in my family can figure out how Eric knew I was even in seminary, much less being ordained that day)…

But there he was… And as I approached, he greeted me and hugged me… In that close proximity I noticed how old he looked… How worn out…How his bulbous red nose spoke of excessive alcohol use… He said that he and my Aunt Dee had driven from their home in Hammond, Indiana to Worcester, Massachusetts so they could congratulate me on my ordination and give me a gift…

At which point my Uncle Eric reached behind himself, and taking from the step the gift he had brought, he turned and gave it to me… It was the violin…

I don't tell you this story to suggest that all of a sudden Eric was transformed from an evil weed to a beautiful shock of wheat… Nor do I tell it to suggest that all of a sudden everything in our family story that had been so fraught with animosity and anger took on a "happily ever after" ending … But I will tell you that in thinking about that experience in light of our Gospel text for this morning, I have come to realize that we are all of us, each and every one of us, both wheat and tares, oftentimes caught in fields not of our own making…

And I will tell you that in that moment when my Uncle Eric handed me the family violin (the very symbol of the mistrust, the anger and the animosity that had infected our family for

all of those years)… When he handed me the violin, for a moment, as I received into my hands the gift he had brought, every tare in both our hearts was burned away, every hateful little inclination caught fire; all of those horrible little things weeping and gnashing their teeth as they flared up and then died… and in the blaze of the tares in which my Uncle Eric and I stood, all I could see, in that moment, was love….

The kind of love that lives and moves and sings and **burns** at the heart of our faith…. The kind of love whose purpose and promise it is to **devastate** all that gets in the way of fullness of life for all of God's children and all of God's creation…

The kind of love that takes all the tares and the weeds, all the hatred and anger and animosity the world has to give into its very heart, and gives back only love, which, if you've ever noticed (as I did on the cathedral steps that day), is the most devastatingly and terrifyingly beautiful kind of judgment possible…

Opening the possibility to us that the message at the heart of the parable of the wheat and the tares is the insight that **God's love is God's judgment**… Even now longing to go to work in the fields of our hearts… for the sake of **our** fullness of life… for the sake of fullness of life for our families, our communities, our congregations, our suffering world…

The truth is, this side of the river we will all, each of us, always be a combination of wheat and tares… Even now I will tell you that I still carry resentments and regrets and so many other unresolved feelings related to my Uncle Eric and my family story… And when I look in the mirror on any given day, for any number of reasons, the weeds seem so much more prevalent than the wheat…

But in the reality of that hard and challenging truth, I carry a small story of great wisdom and hope around with me… It goes like this…

A Native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about he felt about the tragedy on September 11. The grandfather said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting inside my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other is the loving, compassionate one."

The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart, Grandfather?" The grandfather answered, "The one I feed."

How blessed we are then, that we can nourish ourselves with the story of the God who is love… How blessed we are that we can feed on the incarnate presence of that Love in bread broken and wine poured out… How blessed that we can take into ourselves and learn from the example of Jesus and the witnesses who have followed in his footsteps; those like Howard Thurman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahandas Gandhi, MLK, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, and the one we honor in particular today… John Lewis…

How fortunate we are that in the community of faith we can nourish one another, support one another, challenge one another, remind one another of the love whose purpose and promise points to the fullness of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven…

How blessed we are for all of this. Because truthfully, it is only by being fed with the promise, the purpose, and the Presence of the one **whose love is his judgment** do I have a chance in hell of putting my weed-whacker down…

May it be so for all of this day, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… each of us both wheat and weed… each of us held in the embrace of the God whose heart **burns** with a love that will not let us go, and who is not done with us yet… Amen.