



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Wisdom 12: 13,16-19
Epistle Romans 8: 18-25
Gospel Matthew 13: 24-30,36-43

Four Sundays ago I attended services at the Episcopal Cathedral in Louisville, Kentucky. It is an old building, at least by American standards, and has recently been completely remodeled (some say to "keep up" with the nearby Roman Catholic cathedral which expended lots of money on a similar redecoration.) The congregation was of a decent size and the service was proper and meaningful, without any gimmicks or entertainment. However, I started to feel uncomfortable about halfway through the service and I asked myself why. At first, I couldn't figure it out: everything seemed in order, the service was fine, the hymn choices were good, and the congregation of white, middle-class Kentuckians were friendly enough. And then it struck me: that was it! The congregation was all *white*! Yes, there was one black woman who sat at the very back, but she left before the service was through. The rest were all of one race, and I realized that there was a sameness in that congregation that we don't have here at Holy Trinity. I missed my "rainbow family" with its races and colors and backgrounds. I missed the viewpoints and the cultural richness that having Ex-Pats, Filipinos, Chinese and everybody else provides. There is something very "right" about the wonderful spectrum we have.

I'm not the only one who notices that, either. At the Vestry Retreat several weeks ago, one of the things that was frequently mentioned was the multi-cultural nature

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of Holy Trinity and the way that we are learning from each other, adapting to each other, and getting a wider perspective not only on matters concerning our parish, but our country and the world. It's one of the things that make churches like ours special. But in that "specialness" there is also a danger: and that is that we can forget what we've learned from our recipe for cultural and racial cooperation and still think that we are "better" than others. I guess I felt that way in Louisville, and I have to be careful. We can still be plagued by attitudes of class, background, income...stuff that doesn't necessarily have to do with race alone, but with a particularly cruel kind of human pride. And there's another, even greater danger: we can think that we are better *Christians* than others. That brings us to what God is telling us today in the Scriptures.

In today's Gospel, we hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ as experienced by the early Church. Our ancestors in the faith were faced by the same temptations that we are when it comes to pride and egotism. They were told that they were a special people; a "royal priesthood" and that could sometimes make them think that this specialness was something to be protected. Only the "best" people, the holiest, most pious, most religious ought to be members of their church. It was an attitude that they may have inherited from their Jewish forebears the Pharisees, but it was just as alive and well in the Christian fold, too. It's a human reaction: after all, don't we want a church where we have good examples around us of people who are making an honest try of living the Christian life? But the danger is that we then reject or exclude those who might be the very ones who need the Church the most.

The parable Jesus tells to counter this speaks about crops and weeds growing together. "How can we tell the difference?" the exasperated servants ask the farmer, and he comes up with the wisdom: "Let them both grow until the harvest; then they will be separated." It is a message not so much of inclusiveness, but of patience: Jesus is telling his listeners not to take God's vengeance into their own hands- not to be so concerned about the people we might class as "weeds" that we're taking energy away from our own efforts to bear fruit.

Now, there is a sad side to this philosophy of gardening. Jesus doesn't say that the weeds are necessary good or healthy for the rest of the crops. Sometimes painful decisions must be made. As a pastor, it has sometimes, if very, very rarely, been my sad duty to isolate individuals from the congregation; in other words, to ask them to leave. It is a terrible thing to have to do, and it is a discipline that can be applied only in the most serious cases. That is because, as has often been said, the Church is not a 'club for the holy', but a 'clinic for sinners'. The only time that the sick should be turned away is when they refuse treatment and insist on infecting others. We must remember that the farmer in the parable is not interested in the variety of plants in his fields for its own sake. He is concerned above all in saving the good grain. If he is too aggressive in getting rid of the weeds, he risks killing off the good plants, too.

What we learn from this parable is two things: the first is *determinism* and the second is *patience*. We must be determined resolutely to be wheat for God, not weeds- not 'hangers on,' not testing the limits of God's forbearance by being content to stay weeds. But secondly we choose patience: knowing that the Church which is a good housekeeper, not afraid of dirtying her hands by washing her children's soiled clothes, is worth more than one who thinks that it's only for the pure and who wants to isolate and punish here and now those whom we think don't 'make the grade.' Only God can be completely sure of that.

No, we hate sin, but we love people- even sinful ones. And that love must keep us from jumping to conclusions about others. As has been said by a very wise gardener: "Weeds are plants we just don't know how to use yet." May God help us to know what we *don't* know about other people and, while being the most productive plants we can, help others to be healthy, fully functional members of our colorful garden.