

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

7/17/2005

Proper 11/Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

The chorus from "The Farmer And The Cowman," from the musical *Oklahoma*.

The farmer and the cowman should be friends,

Oh, the farmer and the cowman should be friends.

One man likes to push a plough, the other likes to chase a cow,

But that's no reason why they can't be friends.

Territory folks should stick together,

Territory folks should all be pals.

Cowboys dance with farmer's daughters,

Farmers dance with the cowboys' gals.

Every Spring, my Grandfather and I would go off-roading. A cigar hung to the side of his mouth as he shifted into four wheel drive. And we would go hunting in his Ford Pickup. My job, as a youngster, was to be the lookout. Every once in awhile, I would yell out, "There's one." And we would go to that one. We were not hunting game, rare truffles in which I would have been like the pig, minerals, or even an oil well. We were hunting for a type of grass with a long bushy group of seeds called Johnson Grass, a grass which is particularly significant to the song from the musical *Oklahoma*.

In the early days of the Oklahoma territory, there were two types of folks: those whose planting and harvesting were confined to a fixed geographical unit, the farmers, and those whose herds roamed freely and were driven from field to greener pasture across a wide swath of land, the ranchers. The two often quarreled because ranchers would drive their cattle right over the crops of the farmers with little or no regard for their life-changing, plant killing, income destroying actions. As you might surmise, my ancestors were of the planter variety. But we farmers were no greenhorns, prey to the whims of ranchers. Farmers kept ranchers' cattle off of their waving wheat by occasionally dropping a certain type of grass seed into the soil: The seeds were of Johnson grass, a grass that produces poisons in Oklahoma's climate that can kill a cow in a matter of moments. Ranchers learned to fear the grass and drove their herds in other directions.

Year's later, the farmers' solution became a dilemma in itself. Eventually, the structure of agriculture changed, and the only way to survive in Oklahoma as a farmer was to mix ranching with farming. Even wheat farmers needed cattle. Hence, the earlier actions of the farmers to kill cows ended up hurting this new hybrid farmer/rancher. And the problem is still being weeded out. Hence, my Grandfather and I would drive around and dig up the Johnson grass. But if the farmer and the cowman had been friends, we would not have tomorrow's free range, grass fed steak being accidentally poisoned today.

In the Gospel today, we hear a parable about good and evil and their relationship together. Jesus likewise uses the image of vegetation. He tells the story of a wheatfield, something of an idyllic garden-like Eden, which has been planted with good seed. But someone comes along and also sows weeds into the field, something akin to Johnson Grass to a cattleman. Both plants grow up

together. The situation leaves two options: the landowner can either rip the weeds out which inevitably also destroys the wheat because wheat has very shallow small roots. Or the farmer can let the weeds and the wheat grow side by side, and discard the weeds at the time of harvest. Jesus through his land owner shows us that the farmer must instead let both grow together and sort them only at harvest.

And the moral of the parable becomes this: fighting the weeds of life as though we can destroy them is simply ruining any potential wheat crop. Focus on the wheat, not the weeds. The harvester will worry about the rest. In other words, Jesus realized that somehow good and evil, pain and pleasure must coexist in life because there is no other alternative. We cannot conquer evil, even an axis of evil. The good will never root out the evil and destroy it without destroying itself first.

Many could say that this is Jesus being the worst sort of do good-er here, not inviting us to punish others or draw lines between what is good and bad, leaving that up to God. But I would say that Jesus is not being naive. He is not being soft on crime. Jesus is being blunt, and he is giving us a better way to deal with the harsh realities of life than we could have ever imagined. Traditionally, there have been two ways to confront evil in ourselves and others: Fight it, plant the Johnson Grass, or be wimpish, whiny, and ineffective. Jesus, however, offers a third alternative: living with evil, holding fast to our own wheaty roots, not easily yielding to the weeds' roots, and knowing that the good in our world will persevere in spite of the evil that surrounds it. It is the message of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. He submits to the weediness of our world, trusting that in the end, God's love will redeem him and us and bring new life.

Interestingly, when Jesus's householder comes to this conclusion saying, "Let both of them [the weeds and wheat] grow together," the Greek word that is translated "let" is also a word that denotes forgiveness. In a sense, we are invited to forgive our enemies, live by them, grow by them, not demonize, dehumanize them. We are being told that this is the only way of confronting the harsher realities of the world. It is the only way that we can ever really bear lasting, eternal fruit.

You know, the reason that some story about the odd and troubling times of territory days in Oklahoma is appealing in a musical, or at least was, is because it is a bit of humanity at its lowest common denominator. What will two groups of people who have opposing interests do to make sure that both sides can meet their needs? Will the proverbial farmer and the cowman ever be friends? Can two groups who both see each other as evil ever work together? According to Jesus' parable: only if we let the weeds exist right beside the wheat, and let the wheat that can be in us continue to nurture compassion and self-giving love in the midst of that. In all honesty, if I were a farmer, attempting to make it in the environs of the Oklahoma territory and ranchers drove their cattle over my wheat, I do not know what I would do. It would be difficult not to take violent action, to drop in a few seeds of Johnson Grass, sacrificing a few cows to the rancher gods. But we also know that to do so causes only more pain and anguish later, and our hope in the world, the hope of farmers in Oklahoma even today, lies in a different path, the path of Jesus, a way that trusts in a different way for our world to become more heavenly. And despite the

harsh words at the end of the reading, I am willing to say that God acts similarly. If there is wailing and gnashing, it is only because we choose to be weedy and not wheaty.

I close with words from Paul. Though many dislike Paul, I believe here that he is addressing how we can grow in a world filled with weeds. He writes: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved."