

**Sermon "Wheat and Thistles"**  
**Sunday, July 17, 2011**  
**The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector**  
**Christ Church, Shaker Heights**  
**Proper 11 Year A: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

*All the world is God's own field,  
Fruit unto His praise to yield;  
Wheat and tares together sown  
Unto joy or sorrow grown.  
First the blade and then the ear,  
Then the full corn shall appear;  
Lord of harvest, grant that we  
Wholesome grain and pure may be.*

Yes, [at 10:30] we [are singing] [did] sing[ing] “Come Ye Thankful People Come” a traditional Thanksgiving hymn for our Gradual. But singing this hymn in the middle of July is not really as out of context as you may believe. Every Sunday we Episcopalians gather for Eucharist which is the Great Thanksgiving, so a hymn of thanksgiving is always appropriate for our worship.

Plus, I needed “Come, Ye Thankful People Come” for the sermon illustration, so I asked Justin to replace it in lieu of the hymn already scheduled. Sometimes it’s good to be Rector!

Have you ever wondered what those tares - Wheat and tares together sown – are? The lyrics find their root – no pun intended – in the parable of the wheat and the weeds from Matthew that we have heard this morning. The tares are weeds. Who knew? As a gardener I deal with lots of weeds but none I know of as tares.

While identifying a tare may befuddle us, they would have been well known to people Jesus tells the parable too.

Tares were an invasive pest to farmers in Palestine. They are a weed known as bearded darnel or in Latin *lolium temulentum*. Darnel was as exasperating to farmers in the Middle East as kudzu is to the farmers in the Southeast of our country today.

The worst aspect of darnel was that in its early stages it looked exactly like wheat. If you owned a wheat field that had darnel growing in it amongst the wheat, by the time you could distinguish one from the other, their roots would have become so enmeshed that to put out the darnel would have meant pulling out the wheat as well.

Jesus tells this agricultural parable to give an example of what God's Kingdom is like. He says that the Kingdom may be compared to someone who sows good seed in a field and then under the cover of night, bad seed darnel is sown in the field by an enemy, a character who is described as the evil one.

The evil one has sown the darnel as an impediment to the healthy growth of the wheat. Jesus explains that the weeds are the children of the evil one. These evil children are sown in the field in a deliberate attempt to corrupt the lives of the good children of God. Sowing darnel seeds amongst the wheat is a blatant attempt to subvert God's Kingdom.

When the servants of the field owner – who for the purposes of the parable is God - see the darnel they ask if they should go and pull the weeds out? But God says no because in so doing the wheat would also be uprooted and destroyed. The best thing to do, God says, is tend the wheat as best as possible. At the time of harvest the two can be safely separated with the wheat going into the barn and the darnel into the fire. This is how God's Kingdom comes: by tending to the good even when it is enmeshed in the bad.

Like all parables this one is multi-faceted with meaning. Let me observe a few of this parable's facets.

First; there is always a hostile power in the world seeking and waiting to destroy the good seed. Both good and evil are at work trying to impact our lives; one works on the healthy growth of the seed of the word of God. The other seeks to destroy that good word before it can bear the harvest of fruit that God intends for it.

Second; the parable teaches us not to be so quick in our judgments. The servants wanted to tear out the bad weeds. God stayed their hand and said just take care of the field. People are judged not by one single act, but by the entirety of their lives. We all make mistakes, but we are also able to be redeemed by amending our ways and turning away from the evil one and back toward God. That's called forgiveness of sin. The reality is we can only know a part of a person's life, not the whole thing, thereby making it impossible for us to judge rightly.

Which leads me to the most powerful lesson of the parable: it reminds us of Jesus' teaching that we are absolutely not to judge others; it is God alone who has the right and the power to judge people.

At Wednesday morning Bible Study we were surprised to read what *The Message* Bible calls the weeds in this parable. Starting at verse 25 it says, "That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too. The farmhands came to the farmer and said, 'Master, that was clean seed you planted, wasn't it? Where did these thistles come from?'"

The use of thistles to describe the weeds brought to mind a ministry called Thistle Farms that incarnates the lessons of the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

An Episcopal priest, the Rev. Becca Stevens, started Thistle Farms, and its companion ministry the Magdalene Community, in 1997. Both ministries are located in Nashville, Tennessee. Magdalene is a residential program for women who have survived lives of prostitution, violence, and addiction. Thistle Farms is their social enterprise; a business where women from Magdalene create natural bath and body products that “are as good for the earth as they are for the body.” Purchases of Thistle Farms products directly benefit the women who made them.

Thistle Farms employs 32 Magdalene residents or graduates. While working at Thistle Farms, women learn skills in manufacturing, packaging, marketing and sales and administration. It is a supportive workplace where women acquire the skills they need to earn a living wage. Employees have the opportunity to put a percentage of their earnings in a matched savings account. If they graduate from their two-year residency and then stay sober, off the streets and employed another two years, they are eligible for a program that financially assists them to buy their own home. Through Thistle Farms, the women of Magdalene gain much needed job skills, and learn responsibility, cooperation and maybe most importantly self-worth and self-respect.

Thistles Farms acquired its name from the weeds prevalent in those parts of town where the woman once plied their trade as prostitutes. That’s why *The Message* interpretation identifying the weeds as thistles caught my attention. There aren’t much more weed infected fields in the world than those derelict parts of a town where prostitutes work. Children of the evil one thrive in these places: pimps, johns, violent behavior, physical abuse, alcohol and drugs. Their evil roots insidiously enmesh the lives of these women.

The women of Magdalene were all planted as good seed.

Somewhere along the way the evil sewed thistle into their lives whose roots became entangled with their own; roots that the women found nearly impossible to escape. Every woman at Magdalene was sexually abused by the time she was eleven years old. All of them were regular users of drugs or alcohol by the age of thirteen. All of them spent an average of twelve years on the streets.

Our society’s response to the thistle infested lives of prostitutes is almost always to judge the women as disposable human beings, writing them off as not being redeemable children of God.

A decade ago Becca Stevens saw it differently. She understood that despite how diligently the evil one tries to destroy the lives of God’s children and subvert the coming

of God's Kingdom, evil will never ultimately prevail in that endeavor. Becca understood the parable of the wheat and the weeds. She nurtured the wheat, even though it was enmeshed in the roots of the thistle, which had a powerful influence on it. Through that nurturing love, the wheat given into the care of Magdalene and Thistle Farms eventually produces a bountiful harvest, the harvest of healed and redeemed lives. In that harvest God's Kingdom draws that much closer for all of us.

Thistle Farms is a potent reminder that in God's Kingdom no child of God is disposable: ever!

As Thistle Farms website proclaims, "Magdalene stands as a witness to the truth that in the end, love is more powerful than all the forces that drive women to the streets."

And so it is.

*Amen.*