

Proper 11 Year A

“The slaves came to the householder and said where then did these weeds come from?”

Just before Katharine and I left for seminary I received a lovely note from Dottie Wilhite, the wife of a deceased Episcopal priest, Jack Wilhite, who was a dear friend of ours, though Jack and Dottie were closer to our parents age....Jack had mentored Katharine’s parents into the Episcopal Church....Katharine’s dad and he were sailing buddies. Jack, like me, had a previous career in business before we lost our minds and moved our families to some far flung Episcopal seminary.

Dottie had written to give us a few seminary survival tips....”It goes by faster than you think”, she wrote....”You can live on a lot less than you think”, she advised... ‘don’t expect things to be the way you’ve imagined’,...I still remember her saying that seminary life made strange bed-fellows....I could hear her fine southern drawl amid the words written on the page of her engraved ecru stationery; “We even had dear friends who were beatniks.”

Well, as it turned out she was true to the mark. Just moving to Texas was strange enough: the burnt orange Cadillacs; people speaking with an alien twang....the hill country replete with mesquite breaks, cacti and wild cedar, a foreign landscape part lunar and part garden.... And the dry heat.

The first classmate I met owned a dysfunctional seeing eye dog, a black Lab, named Wilsonand then there was Charles, a retired Naval officer, 5 Ft. 4", a little chubby, wispy gray hair, whose claim to fame was doing Elvis impersonations....and then Tim, who literally wore a blue shirt and white pants every single day of his life....He said it made life less complicated....and Rich who worked during his teenage years as a grave digger.....and Shari, the poster child for Obsessive, compulsive disorder.....and Jay who only wore shoes on Sunday. I'm not making this up. Makes you feel good about the church doesn't it?

And, of course, they all became great friends of ours...but what a disorienting mess....and yes, dear Dottie Wilhite, it was not at all what we expected...what we found was a mess....a weedy, and delicious mess. Where then did these weeds come from? Amidst the weeds of our collective adventure, our mantra became.... "Trust the Process." Trust the process, we would remind each other time and again." Things rarely went smoothly: 9/11, 2001 was my first day of class; I had a classmate whose bishop e-mailed him in March of his senior year to tell him he had no job for him in his diocese.....We were families there with all the family problems....people got divorced...people died....The seminary administration taking leave of its senses....and then, on the other hand, the beauty of the academic life, the

reading and the writing... the imagination quickened for many of us....the food of south central Texas...the wheat and the weeds there together in a profound fecundity....the world being made and remade every day amid our life and work....the process, humming with the harmony of mystery, sometimes in a major key... sometimes minor....the wheat and the weeds, the way of the world, an apt metaphor for the way life is in reality.....and trusting the mysterious process was the thing. Gardeners know this.

Matthew has picked up on this tension between wheat and weeds in today's Gospel reading, and is teaching us not just survival, but about the true nature of kingdom of God; the so-called kingdom of God, immanent and in our midst. And Matthew's metaphor is much more than personal. He is looking at the world entire, his world. The wheat is justice, peace, and well-being engendered in community; and the weeds: the oppression, abuse, and violence of the systems of power under which we live; the capricious cruelty of empire. All we have to do is turn on the news... the world overgrown with murderous weeds

But in this ambiguous world, there live the people of faith, the followers of the Way of Jesus, the faithful, who in artful sacrifice strive for the good, for truth, for justice: their faith is nurture for the the wheat...and then that which opposes...the offensive and oppressive things, the obstacles,

the lawless injustice, blind wielders of power... the Pharisees cozy with the status quo, and the henchmen of empire, brutal, unjust... snarled there, unbidden... up and against the collaboratively mutual life and dignity of the emerging kingdomthese opposing forces coexisting in a peculiar dissonant harmony...wheat and weeds both natural to the created order...and they must be left to strive against one another, in a process, a high stakes drama of mythic proportions....Matthew is giving us a map of the world, a map with which to survive and thrive... perhaps there is beauty in tension.... The world, good people, in truth, is not about completion, but the world is process, albeit messy, complicated, contradictory, but a mysterious process in which we dare not count on things working out the way we had planned; nor dare believe we have the control of how things will be.... The world will not conform to our naïve ideologies...We trust the process...

Post-Modern science is indeed telling us that.... the “carved in stone” Newtonian physics of the Enlightenment served us well, but it has been relativized in our day of post-modernity....Physics now tell us that natural law is not law, but a process still evolving, that every facet of the cosmic order is dependent on the other....change the new permanence.... Change and transformation...every atom subject to influence....things change by

being in relationship; The Laws of Science now imaginative speculations about what might be....everything potential, anything possible, a fluid fecundity, iterations of the deep...the map of the world is process, a map not with boundaries, but an expanding map rife with possibility....God Godself...process....God potential, God possibility; God no longer the monolithic principle aloof and unchanging; but God becoming as God's world becomes. The process of becoming and the becoming of process.... And that process is by design, if you will, ambiguous, rife with irony; it includes the dark and the light, good and evil, wheat and weeds.... An essential coexistence, dare I say.

The institutional church, over the centuries has proclaimed a coming utopian future, if not at the end of time, then at least in heaven, in the next life... but that is a pathological illusion. Heaven is now, and heaven is composed of wheat and weeds. We live in this world as stewards of the process of salvation. We are witnesses, despite the evil that besets us... we are witnesses to the good and the true... without such a witness, where then is the hope of the world. We stand for kindness and compassion not for the future but for now; we stand for empathy and justice, not for the future but for now. As American fighter jets attack civilian targets in Iran, as we speak; we stand for peace and non-violence. In every act of love, God's heart for

the good of God's world is made visible, made flesh and blood. Made true.

Our vocation, good people, is redemption in process.

And of course Matthew is arguing that in the end the good, the way of the Christ, the way of sacrifice, the way of kindness; the way of peace; the way of living justly and mercifully will win the day. But not in the future. The end times are now. Love's triumph is now....He is passionate about the premise that small seemingly inconsequential acts of love will bear fruit beyond our dreaming....our labor of Love is divine sustenance for the world...the divine found in the common things of earth; the divine found in common acts of love by the faithful...What if Rosa Parks hadn't taken her rightful seat on the bus? What if Martin had stayed in church... What if Gandhi hadn't fasted almost to death? An entire people liberated. What if Mandela hadn't challenged the choking oppression of Apartheid, serving time in prison for the good of the cause; a new South Africa. And yet, weeds persist. Our acting for the good in even an almost invisible gesture will transform our world; a mundane gesture become extravagant fruit...the weeds of greed, envy, intolerance, violence, and fear notwithstanding.

So here's the thing... well, two things...Jesus begins this teaching with the words, the kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in a field, but an enemy sowed weeds among the wheat. He is

describing not an end, but a process.... And Jesus is not saying that the kingdom comes in the future based on our good works opposing the forces of evil.... he doesn't say that we strive for a future perfect world... He is saying that the kingdom is already here, and it contains both the wheat and the weeds. The kingdom of God is in short a mess... and we dear sisters and brothers are the ones who stand in life's ambiguous complexities for the good, striving for the good, trusting that the good holds true. The kingdom of God I think is less about getting everything right and in good order, and much more about the possibilities of love... and love is messy business... love is never without challenge and opposition... perhaps it is in the way of things that when love is resisted it becomes more powerful, more effective, more visible... What I want to say is that the kingdom of God is characterized by mystery, not perfection... and ours is to bring love to the unfolding mystery, a mystery so vast that it encompasses the whole of it all. Wheat and weeds. ... Love's improbable strategy rests on courage... that love chooses life among the weeds, that love grows best among the snares of evil... so that the whole of the world, the world God loves, may at least see the glory of God, in bits of restoration.... There will always be the weeds, alas... there will always be evil in the kingdom of God... That will never change...the answer to the question why is not for our knowing ... But take

heart good people, in the midst of the weeds, amidst evil and suffering and injustice, there will be love... and love is stronger, and it is love that sustains, and love never dies. Most of all, trust your companions along the way... and love, grown wise and true, will redeem all manner of thing... even those damned, persistent weeds.