

## Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020

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### Text;

Romans 8:12-25

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

I wonder if you have ever played the board game Monopoly? Growing up, it was my least favourite game, and as a parent, my heart would sink when my children would catch up with their cousins and someone would suggest a game of Monopoly. It may be different in your family, but in my experience, the appearance of the Monopoly board signals an increase in competition, aggression and the likelihood of tears before bedtime.

In 2013, a social psychologist in the US, interested in social hierarchies and the ways in which they impact our lives and our societies, conducted a series of studies on the behavioural changes that took place in a rigged game of Monopoly.

In this study, one randomly-chosen player in a randomly selected group was given certain *a priori* advantages...such as: twice the money, greater ability to move around the board (more than two dice!), and more access to resources (higher bonuses for passing 'GO').

Just fifteen minutes into the game, the researchers noticed changes in the behaviour of the advantaged players. They became louder, they moved their pieces more forcefully, their manners deteriorated, and they ate more pretzels. After winning the game, these players attributed their success, not to the obvious advantages they had received, but to their greater strategic skill in playing the game.

According to the researchers, their observations correlated with the observations of other studies into the impact of wealth on behaviour. All of these studies had shown a general tendency for wealth and hierarchical status to increase individuals' sense of entitlement and to make them more likely to prioritize self-interest over the interests of others, while simultaneously decreasing their empathy and concern for others.

These are interesting studies to consider as we reflect on our Gospel reading for today, the parable of the weeds and the wheat. In this parable Jesus says that,

good wheat seed is sown in a field, but an enemy comes and sows weeds in amongst it. When the seeds sprout and the slaves of the householder realise what has happened, they want to pull up the weeds immediately. The householder however tells them that if they try to do this, they will damage the wheat plants. Instead, he tells them to allow the plants to grow together until harvest time.

The weeds this parable refers to are also translated as tares, *lolium temulentum*, also known as darnel or false wheat. Plants of wheat and tares are almost indistinguishable from each other until their ears appear. The seeds of each plant have a different structure and at maturity, wheat is brown whereas darnel is black.

Wheat and weeds, productive and unproductive plants, all growing together in the field, so intertwined that it is impossible to remove one without damaging the other, indistinguishable one from the other, except by the grain they produce.

The difficulty in telling the difference between the seed of wheat and of tares, and the agricultural problems this caused is well attested to in ancient literature, so no wonder the householder in this parable seems unsurprised that there are weeds amongst the wheat. His slaves, who cannot bear the ambiguity and want the good divided from the bad as quickly as possible, but the householder has the wisdom to wait, knowing that to try to act before the plants have grown to maturity will result in wheat plants being uprooted along with the weeds, and some weeds still persisting in the field.

In explaining this parable to his disciples, Jesus says, *The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels*(13:37-39).

Who do we think of as the weeds and the wheat in our society? The children of the kingdom and the children of the evil one? The studies I mentioned earlier tend to suggest that those with fortunate lives may be quick to claim that their privilege is a result of them being wheat, grown from good seed, children of the kingdom. Privilege is easily associated with entitlement. Society has a tendency to reinforce the message that the ones who do well succeed because of their intrinsic characteristics. Their lives are productive because they work hard, or are more intelligent, or simply more morally upright than those others out there.

Society is also clear about who the weeds are; the children of the evil one. They are those of whom society disapproves; the undeserving poor, the ungrateful refugees, the perpetually unemployed, the racially or religiously unpopular, those who transgress societal norms. Their lives do not bear fruit, so society says, because they are intrinsically inferior or because they refuse to play by society's rules.

But what if it is not so. In this parable Jesus makes it clear that human beings cannot tell who is wheat and who is weed. All people are made in God's image and only God can judge the human heart. What if those who succeed in society are not the wheat but the weeds, and their flourishing is at the expense of others? What if there are many struggling wheat plants who simply cannot bear fruit because their lives are strangled by the more vigorous weeds who suck up all the nutrients and block the light for others?

We cannot judge others and if we are honest, perhaps we know that, just as in the world, so the fields of our own hearts are sown with wheat and weeds. As we heard from the Apostle Paul today in his letter to the church in Rome, there is a power within us that resists the Spirit of God and from which human beings need to be freed in order to participate in what Paul calls, *the glorious freedom of God's children* (Romans 8:21). This is not freedom from the physical world but an embodied freedom in a restored creation that accurately reflects, as God has always intended it to, God's image and glory.

God's field was planted with good seed. It was going to be beautiful as it grew to maturity, but an enemy sowed weeds among the wheat, and the field became a mess. The slaves working in the field nearly made things worse by trying to take control of the situation but, at the householder's insistence, they endured the wait between weeds appearing and a crop maturing, ready for harvest.

It is worth reflecting on the enemy that sowed the weeds in the field. Enemies are only mentioned three other times in Matthew's Gospel.

The first time is when we are told to, *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous* (5:43-45).

The second reference to enemies is when Jesus tells the disciples that he is sending them out as sheep among wolves, and that their enemies will be members of their own households (10:36).

The final reference is when Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 saying, *sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet* (22:44).

These three references to enemies reinforce the message of today's parable that it is not for human beings to judge whether people are good or evil, or what they deserve. At present, God tells us to love our enemies as God does, without making distinctions, recognising that there can be deep divisions even amongst those to whom we feel closest, that we cannot tell who is wheat and who is weed. Ultimately God's enemies will be defeated but judgement can only be made by God and God, it appears, is not in a rush.

Life is complex. We live in a world where wheat and weeds grow together and where it is not easy, or even possible, to tell which is which. How do we know if we are wheat or weed? Do we recognise that the benefits we enjoy do not necessarily indicate our worthiness but rather, God's generosity? What might we do to live productive lives and to reduce our human tendency to prosper at the expense of others? How might our lives encourage the growth of others so that they might bear good seed?

"Redemption" in the parable of the weeds and wheat comes when the harvest results not only in grain but a batch of kindling besides. "He has both his wheat safe and some free kindling as well," Dominic Crossan writes. "His enemy is doubly outwitted."

The details of redemption for humanity and for the rest of creation are beyond our vision and will undoubtedly be as surprising to us as the dual harvest of wheat and kindling was to the slaves working in the field in the parable. Certainly, the wait for God's creation to be restored is long and hard, but with a mixture of eagerness and sheer endurance, we hope for what we do not see, God's new creation.