

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 6, 2011

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

LIFE AMONG THE TARES

Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 13:24-30

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Our Lord often uses agricultural images to describe the Kingdom of Heaven and His Holy Church. In one parable, the Church is described as a vineyard into which people are called to work. In another place, the Kingdom of Heaven is described as a sheepfold; in another place, as a farmer sowing seed; in another as a mustard seed. And today we see the Church described as a wheat field.



But something has gone wrong in the wheat field in this parable. An enemy has come and secretly sown tares among the wheat. And the two have begun to grow up together as if they were one crop. Now wheat and tares when they are young plants, look almost exactly alike. It is only when they have matured that one can tell them apart. The wheat bears much grain so that the heads get bowed down with the

weight of it; and tends to dry out first. While the tares bear little black seeds, stand upright, and keep their green color longer. Moreover, while wheat grain is good for food, the seeds of the tares are said to cause dizziness and nausea. But, again, you can't tell the difference between the two plants until they have reached maturity and the wheat is ready to harvest.

Now the servants of the man who planted the field ask if they should go out and pull up the tares; but the man says no. They should rather wait until harvest and then separate them out, so that they do not lose good grain in the process of trying to remove the weeds. The man who plants the field of the Church is, of course, Christ Jesus who by His Word and Spirit calls people to faith and to a new life together in His Church. The servants here are the holy angels, who assist the Lord in gathering the faithful to Heaven, as our Lord says: "He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:31). And the enemy is, of course, the devil who always tries to sow a different seed in the hearts of Christ's people, a seed that is similar to the Word of Christ, but one that proves toxic and leads to death rather than to life, the seeds of doubt, of heresy, of licentiousness, of hatred, etc.

So what is this parable about? It is a parable dealing with judgment; for the Lord does promise that in the end there will be a judgment between the wheat and the tares, the believers and the unbelievers, and that the one will be taken into the barn which is Heaven, and the others will be burned which is Hell. It is also a parable about patience, and about cleansing the Church, and how that cleansing is not to take place hastily when matters are not entirely clear. And it is a parable about life together within the Church; and that is the theme that I plan to focus on today.

So what does this parable tell us about our life together in Christ's Church? It shows us first of all, that Christ is the one who plants His Church, who has planted us in it. He has sown His Word in our hearts and by this Word the Holy Spirit has brought us to faith. But we see here that Christ is not the only one active in the Church. The Devil too is active, trying to deceive those whom Christ has called, trying very hard to turn us away from Him and from His Word to something else, to another word, to another seed which will bear a different fruit and will lead to death.

Second we learn that as a result of the devil's activity the Church is populated not only with people who have a true and living faith in Christ, but also by others who do not. These are the wheat, and the others are the tares.

Third, we learn that we cannot necessarily tell the difference between the true Christians who have a living faith in Christ and the false Christians who have been drawn away from Christ by the enemy. And why can we not tell? Because their outward confession is the same. They learn the same catechism. They speak the same creed. They sing the same hymns. They participate in the same activities. To our eyes the true and the false look alike. And we have not the power to see into the hearts of people to tell the difference. Only God can do that, each Person of the Trinity, that is, has that ability; but we do not.

So what does this mean for us and for our life together in the Church? Some have interpreted this parable to indicate that there should be no discipline in the Church at all; that we should not attempt to distinguish between those who hold to the truth and those who do not, or between those who believe and those who do not. But that is going further than the parable leads us. The distinction in the parable is between plants that look almost identical, not between those that look radically different. And so where there is a clear departure from the faith, a departure marked by a change in confession or a drastic change in lifestyle, then it is right to mark such a thing and to separate such people from the fellowship of the Church, a thing which must be done both to protect the faithful from the influence of heresy and licentiousness, and to call the one caught up in it to repentance so that they may be drawn again to the grace of Christ and restored.

Rather what this parable means is that we should not try to figure out who should be in and who should be out of the Church when the evidence is not

clear. We should not try to discern people's hearts and make judgments against them on such a basis.

But life together is difficult. And we have an innate desire to make such judgments; for the natural inclination of the sinner, of the old Adam that exists within us, is to play god, to judge others and by such judgments to vindicate oneself. And it is easy for us to find things to judge in others. There are those who irritate by their personalities and habits. There are those that one might dislike for one reason or another. There are those whom one might wish to reject altogether if they aren't your sort of person, if a particular one is too brainy or too stupid, too pious or too flippant, too fashionable or too shabby, too sophisticated or too simple, too meek or too rude, etc, etc. And all this the old sinner does without the other person having actually done anything against you. But if they should, then the judgment kicks into high gear. Then one's pride comes to the fore. Then there is complaining, and grudge-holding. Then there is quick-temperedness, and hostility, and maybe even hatred. And one says, "how can I be in the Church with such a person as this one or that one."

But all of this comes not from faith, but from the old sinful nature we carry around within us and that must be continually thrust back down into its tomb. So we must repent of these things. And in doing so we do push the old sinner back down. You see, while we cannot see into the hearts of others, we can see into our own hearts a little. And it is our own sins we are to weigh, not the sins of others. And so our judgment must begin here. And let it lead us not to despair, but to repent again and seek again the grace and mercy of Christ. Mercy which He is ready and willing to give to those who seek it in faith.

So how are we to live together in this field of wheat and tares? St. Paul has the answer to that question. And it is an answer that runs completely counter to the answer of the old sinner. Where our natural inclination is to proud and judgmental, Paul tells us: "put on tender mercies, kindness, humility [and] meekness". Where the natural inclination is to impatient with one another, to get angry and to shun, Paul says: "[be] longsuffering, bear with one another, and forgive one another." And where the sin within us would eventually drive us to hostility and hatred, Paul says that we are to "put on love, which is the bond of perfection." These things the natural man cannot do, but this the man of faith does do; for the man of faith lives by the grace of the Holy Spirit and in union with Christ Jesus.

You can never live as St. Paul says on your own. Here the union with Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit are central to your life and to our life together as a Church. Hence Paul says: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" and then instructs us to do what we do in the liturgy, to sing hymns and chant psalms that we may teach and edify one another by our common confession. And everything we do, He says, must be done "in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." As I have often said and taught, doing things "in the name of Jesus" simply means doing them from faith, as those

who have been baptized in the name of Jesus, whose lives are lived in His grace and by His power. And that is why we give thanks to the Father; for what good we find in us and in our Church is not of our own making, but of His.

And so we also leave judgment to Him. We are not able to tell wheat from tare with any certainty, let alone pull them up. And we certainly should not uproot ourselves from the rich soil of Christ's Church in order to avoid the tares that may be rooted alongside us. Rather, we should be thankful; thankful about our salvation in Christ Jesus, thankful that He has called us and given us forgiveness and life, thankful for the grace He has bestowed on our fellow Christians, and thankful about our place together with them in this Holy Field of His planting.

And when the day comes that He does come down to harvest this field, may He find us laden with much fruit, heads of wheat hanging heavy with grain, and gather us in to His barn where we shall be dwell for ever with our fellow believers and with our Lord in love and in joy. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +