

A Proper 11  
17 July 2011 St Michaels Studio City  
RCL Matthew 13.30

Weeds and Wheat, Catholic and Holy, Patience\*  
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Jesus said in today's parable, "Leave the weeds alone until harvest time." (Matthew 13.30)

We will say in just a few minutes, "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church," when we summarize our Christian faith in the Creed formulated at the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon in the fourth and fifth centuries. These are the characteristics of the Church, what helps to make it what it is. They are characteristics that come, not from herself, but from the God who formed her for His own purposes. She is apostolic, because her faith and her structure go back in an unbroken line to the apostles commissioned by Christ. She is one because she is ruled and served by one Lord, Jesus Christ pouring Himself into her through God's Spirit, a Spirit terribly grieved by the divisions among Christians today. She is catholic, not in the sense of the name of the Roman Catholic Church, but rather in the sense of the Greek word which means universal, that is, a church meant for everyone. She is holy because the God who called her into existence is holy, God's Spirit who vivifies her is holy, Christ who is her Head is holy, and her members are called to be holy, as God is holy.

Quite a mouthful, all of that. One of these days I'm going to do a series of sermons on the Nicene Creed, though not quite yet. But today I would like to talk a bit about two of these characteristics, catholic and holy, because they are in themselves somewhat contradictory and are partly the source, leaving aside human sin, of the conflicts we are suffering in our Episcopal Church today, as well as conflicts throughout the history of Christianity.

Episcopalians, along with other Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox, believe that the Church is catholic, that it is universal, that it is meant for everyone. Not for us the cramped vision of some of the Reformation thinkers and of earlier heretics who conceived of the Church as the home of the saved. The Church is the place where every human person is called to belong; no one is to be excluded by reason of race, culture, gender, sexuality, social position, wealth, sanctity, or any other distinctions by which we divide ourselves. Because the Church is catholic, we all belong together. This is a characteristic particularly amenable to Americans, a nation composed 100% of immigrants from all sorts of places and conditions. We understand what catholic means, though we have failed a bit in the execution.

Episcopalians, along with other Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox, believe that the Church is holy; its members called to be holy; its vital principle, its living breath, the Spirit of God Himself, who is all-holy. What is holiness? Holiness is hard to define but it includes otherness, goodness, beauty, glory, love, virtue, strength, rightness, wholeness (*holy* comes from the Old English word *halig* meaning whole). A dictionary definition says holy is "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness." (Merriam Webster) It inspires in us wonder, love, praise, respect – what the Bible calls fear, fear of the Lord. All of this is to be understood of God, and on that we all agree. The Church is holy because it is *created* by the all-holy God, *directed* by the all-holy God, made a living thing by the all-holy God, its members beloved of the all-holy God.

Most Christians agree about holiness and God. It's the holiness of the members that causes the problem in the Church. That is because every human being is a mixed bag of virtue and vice, goodness and evil, sin and salvation. The Bible says that every human being is a sinner and not just a slightly blemished good person but a deep-down twistedness that is repugnant to God. How do we fit such a compromised creature into the all-holiness of God and God's holy Church? It's a puzzlement, probably impossible of solution, but we keep on trying. One of the resolutions throughout the history of the Church is to throw out those who are seen as not holy; that way the holiness of the Church is preserved. Probably most of us nod our heads in agreement at this; standards, after all, have to be maintained. The unspoken corollary is, of course, that we who are left in the church are the holy ones and we tend to pat ourselves on the back a bit. The world is rightly repelled by this self-righteousness.

But do you see the contradiction here? The contradiction between catholicity and holiness? Holiness, in the human sphere, is always about separation and exclusion, at least until we get God involved. Catholicity is always about expansiveness and inclusion. How can we be both, we who are the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church today? How can we go about maintaining standards of holiness and at the same time assuring that no one is left behind, that all God's human children, mixed bag that we are, are included in the adoption by love that the Divine Father makes happen through the love of Jesus Christ?

Jesus gives us the answer in His parable: don't make the invidious judgments. "Leave the weeds until harvest time." Don't tear up the weeds and throw them away, because you may damage the wheat in the process and you might make mistakes identifying which is which. When harvest comes, the Lord will make the judgment, and judgment is much safer in His hands than in ours. *He* doesn't make mistakes.

Living together as wheat and weeds requires patience on our part, we who are wheat or weeds, or better put, we who are *both* wheat *and* weeds. It requires patience to live together with those with whom we disagree and perhaps regard as sinful. It doesn't matter what the issue is – the place of gays and lesbians today, the place of women yesterday, the place of people of color yesteryear, the place of those so unfairly enslaved by their fellows, the place of the vulnerable and the economically deprived. The principle is the same: live in patience and love in the meantime. God can be trusted to harvest the crop properly at the end.

Note that patience is required, not agreement. We will always disagree about something. But we should be patient catholics, patient includers. God will take care of the holiness part, the distinction and separation of what is not acceptable in His kingdom.

Patience is demanding but also comforting. For it is patience that will keep you and me from being tossed out of the Church for our sins. Patience will keep us all here in God's inclusive love, give God's good-will a chance to change us from weeds to wheat. For that is the difference between plants and persons: plants can't change, people can. The weedy parts of us can be redeemed, turned around, saved for our wholeness, saved for our salvation. Weeds can become wheat in God's kingdom.

That is what Jesus is all about.