

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
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16th Sunday of Year A Mt:13: 24-30

We live in an increasingly binary world where alternatives are framed in a context of "either/or;" you are either with me or against me; where everything is presumed to be black-and-white, cut-and-dried, where all shades of gray have been eliminated. It is a contentious world where those on different sides of an issue, locked in bitter opposition, can find no middle ground between themselves. Each side then feels entitled to use whatever means it can to win their objectives. How do we sort out the mess of half-truths, even lies, the skullduggery, the backbiting, the gossip, the name-calling, that occurs in an imperfect world where tensions and conflicts will inevitably arise? How do we plot our course in life when not everyone out there is wishing us well, maybe even looking for the opportunity to take advantage of us? Do we choose to live in a constant state of suspicion, mistrust, always "gathering the wagons around us" in a posture of self-defense? Or, instead, do we take a stance that is more open, refraining from trying to figure others out when we can't figure our own selves out, and, hence, more willing to excuse, to forgive, to let things sit for a while?

The parable that comprises today's Gospel addresses that very point and, no doubt, arose from some situation of conflict, tension, or disagreement among the very first disciples of Jesus. The wheat and weeds growing together is not unlike the situations in our own lives, where "the good, the bad, and the ugly"--to use the title of an old spaghetti western--are all thrown together, and have to live and work together. It is this ambiguous world, the messy world that we inhabit, wherein people's deeds, motivations, and intentions are not always clear, but often enough interfere with our own. And always, then as now, there are the "true believers," those who presume to have a monopoly upon the truth, and who imagine themselves sufficiently clairvoyant so as to be able to read the hearts and minds of those with whom they disagree. These are the ones in the parable who rush to the master urging that the weeds be pulled up from the fields immediately so as not to contaminate, or worse, destroy the crop of wheat. These are the disciples who approach Jesus complaining that some of their number are not sufficiently devout, or orthodox, or morally upright, or whatever, and so, should be excluded from the community.

The response of Jesus is to wait, to hold off in making that kind of judgment. He says it is at the time of the harvest, at the very end of time, that the wheat and the weeds are to be separated. Judgment belongs to God, and to God alone, for only God can read the human heart. No human being is capable of making so final a judgment

whereby he or she writes off another person so definitively. More curious still, the reason given by the master to the slaves—and here we can presume Jesus' response, as well—as to why they should not separate the wheat from the weeds too soon, is that if they pull up the weeds, they may take the good up along with them. They may, in fact, be doing more harm than good. Evidently, the weeds are not the great threat that the slaves imagine them to be. And, an even greater threat might befall the crop if this sorting out of the good from the bad were to come too prematurely.

Likewise, if we, presuming we can recognize in our own situations those who are the wheat and those who are the weeds, should try to isolate ourselves from those with whom we disagree in matters religious, spiritual, political or whatever; in short, from those whom we think of as our inferiors—"the weeds"—surprisingly, according to the parable, it is we who may be the losers. Because those who think they are right or superior, the "true believers," may have something to learn, something to gain, from the very ones they want to banish from their midst—a lesson that will only be revealed at harvest time, at the end of time, in God's good time. Today's parable, then, is a plea for openness, for charity, for understanding. Ours is to be a church for sinner and saint alike, and only God knows where the difference lies.

Ah, if only matters were so easy, if all we had to do was never to judge anybody, to live by the words, "Judge not, lest you be judged." But, in another place in St. Matthew's Gospel Jesus is depicted as telling His disciples that sometimes judgment is necessary—that if someone has really messed up "big-time," one or two or three should go to talk to that person, urging him or her to get their act together, and, if all else fails, only then avoid that person. So, what are we to make of such diametrically opposed recommendations—on the one hand, to refrain from judgment, and on the other to intervene in judgment for the welfare of individual or the community. The truth is that we need to hear both kinds of commands. At times we have to judge, and other times we have to hold off. But how to do that, and when, is the question that eludes us. Still, whether judging or refraining from judgment, it is always to be done from a motive of charity, of genuine concern for the other person, not just from a motive of trying to gain some feeling of moral superiority over another. Knowing precisely when to do one or the other will require the wisdom that is the theme of today's first reading. And it is an ability that is useful, indeed necessary, in all areas of life—not just those religious.

There is another reason for these seemingly contradictory commands by Jesus. The Gospel is directed to different kinds of people. There are some who are pretty quick on the trigger, very prone to pass judgment on other people. Today's Gospel is directed to that kind of person. Here Jesus is saying, in so many words, when you are

ready to shoot off your big mouth, just “zip” it. Then there are those who try to avoid conflict at all costs; “peace at any price” is their motto. But sometimes it is necessary to step in, take action, lest the life of an individual or the welfare of the group go down the tube, without that intervention. It is to that kind of person that the command of Jesus about making a judgment is addressed.

Let's pray for wisdom, to know when to zip and when to zap, when to keep silent and when it is necessary, to speak the hard word, not the harsh word, but the hard word that at times needs to be spoken. As the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament reminds us, “for everything there is a season,” there is a proper time, there is the right moment--a time to judge, and a time to refrain from judging. Let us pray we can be able to act appropriately and wisely as the situation demands.