

Fr. Curtis Miller     July 18-29, 2020     Homily for the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

If you ever visited Cavendish, Vermont during the '70s or '80s, you might have come across an unlikely figure: the Russian novelist, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Banished from his homeland because he bravely spoke out against the evils of the Soviet Union, he chose to spend his exile in this small village in southern Vermont. Solzhenitsyn was an astute observer of human nature, having seen the best and worst of it during his life. He had spent eight years in the gulag, sentenced to hard labor, where he witnessed both the depths of cruelty and the strength of the human spirit. One of his most insightful observations fits well with the message Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds from today's Gospel reading. Solzhenitsyn wrote:

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place ... At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood.”

Wouldn't it be easy if we could just sort out people who are good and bad, separating the wheat from the weeds? But it's not that simple. As Jesus teaches, the wheat and the weeds grow up with intertwined roots. You can't pull up the weeds without uprooting the good wheat. And so it is with us. And as Solzhenitsyn observed, the line between good and bad is within our own hearts. God will sort out the good from the bad in the end, at the last judgment. That's good news because it gives us an opportunity to repent, to change our lives.

Just as it is possible for the wheat to grow up among the weeds, so it is possible for us to be good even when we are surrounded by an evil environment. We don't have to be defined by the people and situations around us. Instead, we can make a positive difference by our good example as faithful Christians. Maybe people around us are gossiping or being negative, or promoting evil. We don't have to go with the flow. Instead, we can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, changing the tone of the conversation, and bringing Christ into the world. The civil rights activist, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote that we can either be like thermometers that merely reflect the temperature around us, or we can be like thermostats, which have the power to change the temperature. As Christians, we are to make the world more Christian, not allow ourselves to just become more like the world.

We are unable to have a positive impact on the world around us, however, if we're allowing the weeds to grow up in our own hearts and choke out the goodness within. And because it is so hard to pull up the weeds without disturbing the wheat, the best practice we can observe is to not let the weeds grow to begin with. How do we stop the weeds from growing? We have to stop feeding them.

There is an old Cherokee legend that you might have heard before. An old man tells his grandson that there is a struggle inside each of us between two wolves, one good and one bad. The grandson asks which one will win in the end. The grandfather replies, "The one that you feed." If we feed our resentments, our selfishness, our anger, and pride, then the evil will win out within us. But if we instead feed our mercy, our selflessness, our empathy, and humility, then good will win out in the end. It's up to us.

The good news for us as Catholics is that we know that we're not fighting this struggle alone; Jesus is with us, and He offers us the graces we need in abundance to allow good to predominate in our lives. Jesus offers us forgiveness for our sins and strength to do good, especially through the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.

When we see all the evil in the world around us, violence, war, unrest, crime, and countless other acts of wickedness, we might be tempted to think that God is powerless to stop this evil. After all, it has been twenty centuries since the birth of Christ. Why don't things seem better? It is then that we remember that God's apparent delay in eradicating all evil is directed toward our salvation. He wants to give us a chance to get on the right side, to cultivate a good crop of wheat, so that the goodness within us will predominate over the bad. None of us is perfect, but if we continually open ourselves up to God, He will help us to tend our fields. If we do, then when the day of the harvest comes, we will have the joy of celebrating God's final victory over every evil and a fruitful harvest of goodness.