

BEING AN OPEN CHURCH
Year A – Proper 11 – July 17, 2005
The Rev. Patrick R. Close

Jesus uses a common story today as his parables, the wheat and the weeds. Now I'm not a big fan of weed pulling. When I was growing up, I spent a lot of time on my grandparent's farm. Since I was one of the younger family members, I got assigned what I thought was punishment ... pulling the weeds out of the gardens. Now this was not some little patch of a garden in front of or behind the suburban house. There was a two-acre garden out by the house and another one down the road and across the creek of five acres. I hate weed pulling!

I can remember my grandmother warning me as I headed off to one of the gardens, "Don't pull up the good plants!" Can you tell the difference between good plants and weeds? Early in the growing season, it is almost impossible to tell the difference. I'm sure that I pulled up as many plants as I did weeds. Jesus knew his audience would identify with this story. By the time you can identify the weeds, the weeds have twisted their roots around the good plants. It's almost impossible to get them out.

What Jesus was proposing was unheard of for farmers. They would do everything they could to get rid of the weeds. Most of all, they would want to avoid the weeds "going to seed" and producing even more of the noxious plants. Farmers would root out the weeds as soon as possible. But Jesus is proposing something else. Leave them alone until harvest!

Jesus' parable speaks to us, the community of faith. In any Church, we face good and evil, believers and non-believers. What is being offered to us is simple ... it's not up to us to judge. The quality of someone's relationship to God belongs to God alone. We have no right to exclude others from Christian fellowship ... even if their actions trouble us. To try to root out the weeds in our community harms the unity of the community more than it does the offender!

Today in our Church we hear a lot of talk from people about who can and can't be part of the community. This is dangerous ground. Anytime you hear people say: "You must," or "You can't," or "You're not allowed or welcomed," ... run away! These are dangerous people.

Let's try a little experiment this morning. If you a male with long hair, get up and move to the outside of the pews. You see, we have to be suspicious of these people (even though one of them is my son). No, let's have all balding men get up out of the pews. You see, I don't want to be reminded that I'm losing my hair. Now how about all older women ... (laughter) ... whoops, let's think about that for a moment ... maybe I better not touch that one. How about people with glasses? (One little boy cried out, but Fr. Pt, you have glasses). I know I do ... but I get to make the rules. Now, everyone with blue eyes has to get up and move.

Look around at whose left in the pews. Are you getting nervous? You should be. What group of people will be excluded next? If we keep this up, pretty soon, no one will be

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left. It's dangerous for us to start deciding who can be in and who can't. Jesus is telling us that it's not up to us to make the decisions about who's in and who's not.

What must a community have? The community of faith must be a place that is marked by compassion, acceptance, understanding and kindness. It's not our task to separate people. God will take care of that. God's way is to care for all. God will do the judging later. We don't have to worry about it.

Jesus' parables almost always contain the unexpected. He turns the expected world upside down. Jesus takes everyday experiences and relates them in a new way to our understanding of God and community. The farmers in Jesus' audience would have said weed! This is equivalent to us judging who is in and who is out. Jesus tells his audience to leave the field alone, let the wheat and weeds to grow together. He tells us not to be judging, to let it alone. God will make the final decision.

For us, I think the meaning is clear. The community of the faithful needs to put out a sign "All Welcomed!" We are to be an inclusive community. We will need to be patient and tolerant in order for this to happen. It's not our place to identify the weeds ... too often we get it wrong anyways! Jesus cautions us that our weeding could actually destroy the wheat! The community of faith is about CONVERSION not perfection!

One of the major difficulties I have with the debates going on in our Church today is that we have sinners judging sinners. Beware when this happens! Such actions destroy community. We are called to act with compassion, not judgment. The Church can't focus on expulsion, rejection and prohibition as its way then expect for health or growth. Remember our exercise? Who's next to being excluded?

When we can focus on renewal, conversion and community ... we will see things form. Let Jesus decide at the end. It's not up to us. I keep hearing that other famous saying from Matthew's Gospel, "Judge not that you be judged!" We have to avoid judging ... for we may surprised that we end up being judged! Are we prepared to be found guilty and asked to leave? Let's err on the side of including ... and God promises us that great things will grow and happen!