

**Sunday, July 23, 2023**  
**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11 Year A)**

Romans 8.12-25; Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/662135302132417>

*(Sermon begins at about 20:15)*

**“Growing into Who We Are Created to Be”**

By our very nature, we are continually growing and changing. From the moment we enter the world at our birth until the moment we depart at our death. Growing and changing physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. This reality of growth and change, of ongoing transformation, is a central theme in both our Epistle reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans and in our reading from the Gospel according to Matthew. Both looking at the inevitability of growth and change, with an eye toward the end game. Toward the hope and the promise of who God creates and calls us to be. Although, admittedly, Paul and Matthew—or rather Jesus as reported by Matthew—approach the subject in very different ways.

Paul talks about transformation on a cosmic level. That creation itself “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” That the futility of death and decay that is a part of the process of all life, of the entirety of the created order, will be eliminated in the fullness time. Implying a fundamental transformation in all creation. A fundamental transformation on a cosmic level, as well as on a personal level for us as children of God. Not just a transformation, but the creation, the birth, of something completely new.

As Paul notes, this is an ongoing process, just as life itself is an ongoing process of growth and change, when he writes “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” An ongoing process of which we, as God’s children, are also a part. As Paul continues: “and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” Implying a transformation that will occur when we outgrow these earthly bodies, when we leave this earthly life, and are welcomed into God’s heavenly realm. Now, of course we don’t know specifically what that will look like. But the important thing is the hope and the promise of continued, renewed, and deepened relationship with our God as implied by adoption. That God chooses to bring us into the fullness and fulfillment of the relationship with him that has been growing and continually strengthened throughout our lives. The fullness of relationship that humanity was created for in the first place. The fulfillment of who we were created to be, collectively and individually. All brought to its culmination, its ultimate expression, in the age to come.

Paul concludes by noting that this transformation, this new birth we anticipate, is something we must await with patience. Because the reality is, there is nothing we can do to hasten it. We have no choice but to wait. Although, that does not mean that we sit around and twiddle our

thumbs while we wait. The first part of our Epistle reading implies that we actually take an active part in the process. Paul tells us, “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live . . . When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God.”

God is always reaching out to us seeking to be in relationship. It is in our continual seeking to be in relationship with God, crying “Abba! Father!” that we move closer and closer in that relationship. Abba was how Jesus often referred to God. Abba being the Aramaic term not for Father, but for Daddy or Papa. A term of endearment which implies a deep and abiding trust and intimacy. A trust and intimacy that God invites us to share as we continually grow in our relationship with him. That is what our lives of faith are about. Continually seeking those ways in which we can deepen and strengthen that relationship to which we have already been adopted into—that of beloved child of God.

And then there’s the Gospel. In the readings we have been dealt today, the Gospel lesson does not present such a warm and fuzzy image of our lives of faith: the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat. This parable uses the image of growth and of harvest to describe the life of faith. With harvest often used in Scripture as an image for judgment. This particular reading, with the image of both wheat and weeds recognizes that there is good and there is evil in this world. That there are children of the kingdom and children of the evil one, and at the harvest, at the final judgment, the good will be spared and the evil will be thrown “into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And while this particular passage can be, and often is, interpreted as justification for an “us versus them” approach to Christianity—justifying our own judgmental attitudes about who we think is worthy of the kingdom of God and who is not—it really is primarily a promise that in the fullness of time, Satan and the forces of evil in our world will be defeated and God’s kingdom will be fully established. In short, this is a parable of assurance that in the fullness of time, God will prevail. So, if we do our best to live according to God’s laws here and now, we have nothing to worry about down the road. When God prevails, we, too, shall prevail.

That said, I do think this parable nonetheless has something to teach us about our ongoing life of faith leading up to the harvest. And more importantly, about being gentle with ourselves when it comes to how we view our own lives through the lens of our faith. Beyond the cosmic, eschatological nature of this parable, the distinction between wheat and weeds, the judgment regarding what is wheat and what is weed, the Gospel image of wheat and weeds growing side-by-side does have something to teach us about our own lives as we wait out the birth pangs of our own destiny as those adopted into God’s family.

In the education and formation of spiritual directors, one of the things we spend some time looking at is what Carl Jung referred to as “shadow.” The recognition that, no matter who we are, no matter how good a person we might be, we all have a shadow side of ourselves. That part of our life and personality that we have suppressed because it may be too painful to acknowledge. That part of us, those qualities or characteristics we worry are less appealing to others. That part of us that we are ashamed of and hide from others. And often times, are so deep-seated, that they are often hidden even from us. For Christians, those parts of ourselves we view as being inconsistent with or counter to what God asks of us, of who God calls us to be.

I would liken these to the weeds that are among the wheat that is our otherwise inherently good self. The wheat being that part that is made in the image and likeness of God and which seeks to grow into the full stature of who God calls us to be. In the parable, the householder tells the slaves not to pull out the weeds, as doing so “would uproot the wheat along with them.” So too, that shadow part of ourselves is inextricably part of who we are and cannot be readily excised. Oh, sure, when dealing with behaviors and characteristics, we do have some ability to work on changing certain aspects of ourselves. But some of these are so deeply rooted and such a part of who we are, that it is not always possible to eliminate them. At least not completely. Tame, maybe. Control, maybe. Eliminate, not completely. And again, some of these qualities are so deep that we may not even be aware of them ourselves.

Fear not. All is not lost. Even if we cannot completely remove these aspects of ourselves, we can learn to live with them, just as the wheat and the weeds are left to grow side-by-side in the field. Just as the householder recognizes that they are there together, so too do we need to recognize we have the shadow side of ourselves alongside the good and beautiful parts of ourselves. And that God loves us anyway. And the reality is, there are parts of our shadow that are actually helpful at times, and can manifest in positive qualities when needed. For example, someone with a real stubborn streak (not that I would know anything about that) can draw upon that to help persevere in the midst of adversity or in a difficult situation.

Admittedly, the whole concept of shadow and how it operates in our lives is very complex. And this is not meant to be a lecture in Jungian Psychology. But the point is, none of us are completely wheat. And none of us are completely weed. We contain elements of both within ourselves. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, Jesus advises us against becoming obsessed about it and causing damage to ourselves by going on a psychological or spiritual slash and burn rampage. Being aware, yes. Doing what we can to affect change and to improve ourselves, yes. After all, that is what we continually seek to do as beloved children of God. To seek to improve ourselves and to live more fully into who God wants us to be. But also knowing that we are not perfect. We are not going to get it right all the time. We will always have flaws and imperfections. That is part of being human. But the good news is, God accepts us and loves us just as we are right now. And that in the fullness of time, God will take what is good and beautiful and gently remove that which is not.

This is the hope and the promise of our faith. That is also the “groaning in labor pains” that is the life of faith. But we are assured that it will all be worth it, when, in the fullness of times, we will be glorified with Christ and fully welcomed into the loving embrace of the One who adopts us and calls us Beloved; the One who we call “Abba, Father.”