

## A Sermon for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity, November 9, 2008

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Some might wonder what we are doing reading Epiphany lessons in Trinity season. This year Trinity is Twenty-seven Sundays long because Easter was early. The Prayer Book only provides lessons for twenty-five Trinity Sundays and instructs us to borrow from the end of Epiphany season when we need more.

In the gospel, the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30), a man planted seed in a field. His workers prepared the soil, sowed the seed and watered the ground. But when the first growth was evident, they discovered that there were tares growing along with the wheat.

Tares are not ordinary weeds. They are literally “darnel,” a weed that in its early stages of growth looks like wheat. This is why the landowner told his workers not to pull it up. In attempting to remove the tares, the workers might mistakenly pull up some good wheat.

I had an experience that highlighted the dilemma when I worked in landscaping in college. My job one day was to weed a section of ground cover. The main weed in the section looked very much like the groundcover, and I made a mess of the whole area.

This is one parable for which Jesus gave the interpretation. Matthew 13:36 tells us that the disciples came to Jesus and said, “Explain to us the parable of the tares in the field.” Jesus said:

*He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness," and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 13:36-43).*

We learn at least three things from this parable. First, there will be a day of judgment. “He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.” The Christian world view is governed by the belief that nobody is getting away with anything. God has appointed a day, the last day, to sort out all that is wrong in the world.

This judgment was described by Jesus variously as the separation of wheat from tares, sheep from goats (Matthew 25:32-33) and good fish from bad fish (Matthew 13:47-50). Jesus said, “Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36).

We come to Jesus precisely to be saved from this coming judgment. We are here to deal with our sins in a way that leads to redemption. We ask God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires

known, and from whom no secrets are hid, to cleanse us. Confession leads to forgiveness, to membership in Christ's body, to a place in the kingdom and a favorable verdict on the last day. This fact of a future judgment leads to the second point. Because evil will not be finally eradicated until the Last Day, we should be skeptical about utopian schemes for universal peace and prosperity. Every human scheme involves humans and, thus, by definition will fall short of perfection.

To be sure, we are called to manifest the kingdom. We should rejoice in the triumph of good over evil. And God's judgments also take place in this world. Nonetheless, we know that we will not have an unblemished world, or a pure church, until the Day of Judgment and Resurrection.

The only utopian scheme that will work in the long run is the kingdom of God. We do, indeed, believe that God will, in his good time and by his power, rid the world of evil, raise us from the dead, renew the creation and eliminate sin, sickness, sorrow and death. But we must necessarily have more measured expectations of what can happen before that day, in this world.

This brings us to the third point. Our calling between now and the last day is to bear fruit and, so, distinguish ourselves from the tares and bear witness to Christ in this world. The main difference between the wheat and the tares, though they may look alike, is that wheat produces wheat and the tares produce nothing that is edible or good.

Jesus said, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Fruit is the growth in virtue and good works that the Holy Spirit produces in our lives. Galatians says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (5:22).

It is an organic thing, like the growing of wheat. The planted seed, fed by sunlight and water, grows and produces food to eat. The seed of the Holy Spirit has been planted in our hearts. As we live in God's presence and are fed by his grace, the life of God within us grows. We become better people who do the good things God wants us to do.

We come to the altar of God to feed the life that Jesus has planted in us. We leave the altar to bear fruit and, so, to confirm our destiny on the right side of God's final harvest. As the hymn (137) says,

*For the Lord our God shall come, and shall raise his harvest home.  
From his field shall in that day, all offenses purge away.  
Give his angels charge at last, in the fire the tares to cast.  
But the fruitful ears to store, in his garner evermore.*