

Genesis 28:10-19a  
Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23  
Romans 8:12-25[  
Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Every single day of our lives, each one of us is called on to make decisions. Some of those decisions are rather mundane...what time will I get up? What will I have for breakfast? What chores will I do today? Will I call any of my friends? Will I get some exercise? Is today the day I should pay my bills? Should I go to the grocery store? You get the picture. Most of these decisions are just a matter of course in an given day, but from time to time we need to make some pretty substantial decisions...decisions that require thoughtfulness, perhaps some research and maybe even a little soul-searching and prayer. Those decisions require that we make some sort of judgment call. And sometimes, those judgment calls are above our pay grade. We don't have enough information. We aren't well-versed in the possible consequences or outcomes of our choices. Or maybe we just can't figure out what the right choice is. That predicament happens more often than we realize. And sometimes not making a decision at all is the right decision. Many situations in life are simply above our pay grade.

When we listen to the gospel reading for this morning, it's easy to fall into an immediate dichotomy of "us or them". We are hearing about the wheat and the weeds. There are good people and there are evil people. Right? We are the good people. Right? And those people over there doing things we don't agree with...well, they're the bad people. Right? It happens all the time. And, no, that's not exactly what this scripture passage means. This is actually a cautionary tale about making judgments and the perils of making assessments beyond our pay grade.

Jesus is still trying to explain to his followers the opposition he is encountering with his ministry and the persistent presence of evil in the world. Why are so many people resisting him and even rejecting him? Don't they know that he's a

good guy? He's the best guy? He's the Son of God? Well, apparently not. And why is so much bad going on in the world? Jesus tries to explain it by teaching in parables. Last week we heard the parable about the Good Sower and the seeds that fell on different types of soil. That parable is about personal responsibility. And if we were in any doubt, personal responsibility counts. We are responsible for what we say and for what we do and for the decisions we make. If we are the soil, then we are responsible for whether or not we nurture the seed that falls on us. The chief difference between the parable of the sower and the parable about the wheat and the weeds is that while the former concentrates on human responsibility...personal responsibility, the latter focuses on the devil and evil forces that share responsibility for the negative response to God's word. So is the rejection of Jesus about the seed falling on bad soil or is it about the sowing of bad seed by of the devil? Well, it's probably a little bit of both. Even as Jesus is trying to explain to us the mind of God and what we need to know about the nature of good and evil, we realize that such insight and understanding is definitely beyond our pay grade. Do any of us know the mind of God? Jesus is as close as we're going to get in knowing the mind of God which is why it is so important that we pay close attention to what Jesus says and what he does. And still, we very often don't get it.

We tend to think that such choices were faced only by those who walked the earth with Jesus when he lived here with us. Sometimes we fail to realize that Jesus is still walking with us and we are still faced with those choices...between good and evil. What comes to mind for me is an experience I had about 14 years ago. Many of you may remember that there was great controversy within the Episcopal church about the consecration of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. There was a heated debate about whether or not the House of Bishops should have allowed that consecration to take place and many people were angry and upset. It was a controversy all over the country. There were seven churches in the Diocese of Virginia who voted to leave the Episcopal Church altogether in protest. I was on the Vestry of one of those churches. And I was one of two people on a 12 person Vestry who voted to remain in the Episcopal Church. I had no idea which way God wanted us to vote on this issue, but it

seemed to me that there was no issue among us that warranted the tearing apart of the body of Christ that was the church to which I belonged. And that's what was happening to my congregation. No issue could be that important or that powerful. What was presented to us was that God was sorting out the wheat and the weeds...which is actually not going to happen until the end of the world...but I couldn't tell who were the weeds and who were the wheat. It seemed to me that there would be wheat who left the Episcopal Church and there would be wheat who remained. And there would be weeds who left the Episcopal Church and there would be weeds who remained. The identification of wheat and weeds seemed to me to depend on how we treat other people not on which side we choose on this issue. In the end, the attempt to root out the wheat from the weeds meant that people on both sides of this issue were damaged as was the body of Christ that was our church. And that's exactly what Jesus warned against in this parable. But two congregations arose and both survived and both were once again a mixture of both wheat and weeds. I did make a decision, but I still have no idea how God wanted us to decide on this issue. It is the angels -- not any human beings -- who are authorized to pluck out the weeds from the wheat. And that will happen on Judgment Day. It was beyond my pay grade.

Jesus makes it very clear to us that there is no way that we can decide who is "in" and who is "out" in terms of being in God's good graces. In Matthew 12:50, Jesus declares his family to include those who do "the will of my Father in heaven," a descriptor that might embrace a wide and surprising variety of people. There are those who pronounce judgment not only on people within the church but on people outside the church -- on people of other faiths, for instance -- declaring them to be destined for eternal damnation. Whether judgment is focused within the church or without, it does serious damage to the church and its mission. Such judgment is beyond out pay grade.

The Bible's expectation of a last judgment, with its verdict of reward and punishment, should help undo our sense of self-righteousness by confronting us with the importance of our own actions. We will be held accountable. Taking the last judgment seriously is the antidote for the sentimentalism and cheap grace

that so often conspire to wither moral responsibility. We should take the last judgment seriously. It's real. And it tells us that God is something other than an amiable fellow who looks the other way no matter what. Furthermore, the notion of a last judgment is a vivid way of insisting that what we do really matters, in this world and the world to come. It is important to recognize that actions have consequences. If we sow hatred and discord, we will reap hatred and discord. Natural consequences occur and accountability to God is required.

One thing we need to keep in mind is that all of us...each one of us...is a tangled mess of both wheat and weeds. Not a single one of us is wheat alone. And not a single one of us is weed alone. The roots of both are entangled within us...impossible to separate without damage to what is good. Perhaps when Jesus tells the angels to collect the weeds at the harvest and to burn them in the fire, he means that everything within us that causes us to sin will be burned away. And the rest, the wheat within us, all that is good within us will have been made ready for entry into the Kingdom of heaven. That is good news indeed.

Remember, too, that Jesus is with us every day of our lives to help us along the way and he is with us on the Day of Judgment. He has promised to be our Advocate with the Father when we stand before God. That's definitely good news. And that's not beyond his pay grade.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.