

DON'T LEAP TO CONCLUSIONS!
Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church
5 Pentecost, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, Year A
July 17, 2011
Thack Dyson

Are you judgmental? Do you have a tendency to leap to conclusions? Admittedly, this is an unusual beginning to a sermon on Sunday morning! However, this is a serious inquiry. Are you judgmental? I have to confess I can be—and it took the recent Casey Anthony trial to remind me of that.

No criminal case since the infamous O. J. Simpson case in the 1990's captured our country's attention more than the recent Casey Anthony trial. Her acquittal came as a surprise to so many people who had already concluded she was guilty. While some legal pundits have applauded the jury's verdict and declared it as tangible proof that our system of justice works, most people are unconvinced and believe a child murderer has been set free.

The public backlash has extended to the jury and many of them are fearful of reprisals because of their "not guilty" verdict. The jurors have been vilified for the most part, and those few jurors who have come forward since the verdict to justify their decision have been roundly rebuffed by the public.

Now that Ms. Anthony is a free person, the court of public opinion will most likely continue to try her for some time to come. Already over 44,500 people have signed onto the "I hate Casey Anthony" page on Facebook. This is just one example of how many people were viscerally affected by this case.

Though I generally believe in the presumption of innocence, the rule of law, and letting justice be done, I have to admit I was also shocked by the verdict. While I did not

watch the broadcast of her case, I followed the events in the newspapers and network news. What I read and heard about the trial, coupled with Ms. Anthony's seeming indifferent behavior immediately following her daughter's disappearance, had convinced me of her guilt. I was certain the jury would convict her and lock her up for a long time to come---or rather, hoped they would. I, like so many others, wanted Ms. Anthony to be removed from civilized society for this crime.

Now many of you may think my feelings are justified, and may have had the same or similar feelings. On that basis it would be easy to wrap myself in the mantle of righteous indignation. After all, this was an egregious case involving an innocent child. It's not hard to justify ourselves when we think we are right.

Yet, even though my feelings about Ms. Anthony may be consistent with those of the majority of people, this doesn't make my feelings any more righteous. No, I erred on the side of believing in the presumption of guilt in this case and had Ms. Anthony convicted before the prosecution made its opening statement. While you may give me a pass on this one, it speaks to a deeper issue---a character flaw of mine, if you will. My opinion was also the by-product of a judgmental spirit. Though I like to think I am more broad minded than that, this aspect of my character occasionally rears its ugly head and causes me to prejudge and stereotype others without reflection. When I succumb to this, someone gets hurt, usually those closest to me. The Anthony verdict reminded me that there are occasions when I don't always have to have hard evidence to judge the worth or merit of another person.

Yes, at times I can be judgmental. What about you? Are you quick to judge others? If you are uncertain if you share this character flaw, we are easily identifiable

because we tend to ostracize “others,” and by “others” I mean anyone whose real or presumed behavior or attitudes angers or offends us.

Working from this explanation, are you judgmental? If you are, then Jesus gives us a classic teaching about judgmentalism in today’s Gospel lesson about the parable of the wheat and the tares.

In our gospel lesson today, we find our selves in the midst of Jesus’ many parables, these gems of wisdom he used to communicate to a crowd that was uneducated and unschooled in the language of the religious folks. In the parables, Jesus communicated in the language of the people, using farming and shepherding metaphors that spoke to the common people. Yet somehow today, in our educated society, all our knowledge just seems to separate us more from understanding the parables set before us. In fact, we are so removed from the culture of his day and agriculture in general, that we have assigned a modern name to the parable and refer to it as the parable of the “wheat and the weeds.” You see, a “tare” in Jesus’ day was a harmful weed. In this instance, it is thought to have been a weed known as the bearded darnel (*lolium temulentum*), a species of rye grass, that resembles wheat until the ear appears on the plant.

In the parable, a farmer sowed good seed in his field, but in the night an enemy came and sowed tares with the wheat. When the crop began to mature, it became obvious that the noxious tares had been sown with the wheat. The servants offered to pull up the tares, but the wise farmer said, “No, in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest. Then we will separate the tares from the wheat.”

Jesus explains the parable by saying the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the Kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy is the devil. The harvest is the final judgment and the reapers are God's angels.

The surprise of the story is in not letting the weeds be pulled up once they are discovered. The sower won't permit this because the process of weeding would result in destroying some of the wheat by mistake at the same time. However, everyone who has gardened at all knows that it's important to get the weeds out, even if it means sacrificing a healthy plant or two here and there. In the end, as long as there is still a good sized crop left, what's the loss of a few good plants? After all, the parable of the sower, shared by Jesus in last Sunday's Gospel reading, talks about how weeds and thorns can choke healthy plants out of existence. Yet, this parable's message is clear: God tells us to not weed the field—because the wheat is too precious to risk destroying it by mistake.

But isn't this frustrating news? We can put criminals in prison, so why can't we remove or exclude all the other "undesirables" in our midst instead of waiting for God to do it? It is hard for us righteous folk to be passive in these situations. It is also hard to believe that we can do less harm by doing nothing at all. So, what is Jesus asking us to do? Basically, Jesus is saying leave the weeding to God and do what you were created to do—be fruitful wheat.

I believe the tares are left to grow with the wheat for a couple of reasons. First, God knows we aren't skilled or qualified to separate the good from the bad. As it says in Matthew 25, on the day of judgment, Christ will separate the sheep from the goats. It is neither our place to judge—nor to assume the role as the cosmic County Agent helping to

eradicate the weeds of the world. That's God's job and He doesn't need our help in the matter. Second, sometimes we look and act more like tares than we do wheat. Hence, it is often hard to tell the difference.

This reminds me of a story in H. A. Ironsides' little book, *Illustrations of Bible Truths*. In it he points out the folly of judging others. He related an incident of a man called "Bishop Potter", who was headed for Europe on an ocean liner. Upon boarding, he discovered he was to share his cabin with another passenger. After meeting his roommate, the bishop went to the purser's desk to inquire if he could place his valuables in the ship's safe. Judging from the questionable appearance of his cabin mate, he was suspicious of the man's trustworthiness. Accepting the bishop's valuables, the purser replied, "It's all right, bishop, I'll be very glad to take care of them for you. The other man has been up here and left his for the same reason."

Frankly, when I think about it, I like this parable. Thank goodness weeding isn't going on in the field today, because there are some days when I feel more like tare than wheat. Thank goodness I don't have to show my fruit today, because there are some days when I don't feel like I'd have so much to show. Thank goodness we aren't in charge of weeding in one another's gardens, because there are some people I know would love to weed me of everything that irritates them. Thank goodness we aren't in charge of weeding, because some days I'd be tempted to treat as weeds those who I really love and cherish. Thank goodness God sets out our tasks for us: what our role is, and what our role isn't. Our role is not to weed, but to bear fruit, to grow strong, to resist being choked down by weeds around us. Our role is not to uproot that which grows near us, or to inspect our neighbor's fruit, even when it smells rotten to us.

Jesus' parable is in fact one of mercy for us: there's still hope for us—it's not set in stone how things will turn out yet. There's still time for us to change if we feel we are too much like the tares and not much like the wheat.

For some of you, this can be a frustrating parable. Jesus is asking not only for our forbearance, but our patience as well when dealing with all the tares around us. It is natural for us to blithely go weeding out what we perceive is evil among us, usually with the smug satisfaction we are right. Unfortunately, in our haste to purify the field, we may injure the innocent. As your former rector Larry Thornton once said in a Bible study at St. Christopher's years ago, "God doesn't want us to pull the weeds out because they may actually be wheat that's just blighted."

Along these lines, the author C. S. Lewis points out that when Christians aren't careful, their sinning can shift from the overt, outward, and visible sins of lying, cheating, stealing, and swearing, to the more inward, hidden, and non-apparent ones, including what he characterizes as "a critical spirit" . . . a spirit of judgmentalism. In fact, he points out that this sin is one of the transgressions which is more commonly committed by church people than by those who are not. So prevalent is it in churchly circles, that it is sometimes labeled "Christian cruelty."¹ This may account for why Allen Dennis, the former chair of the History Department at Troy University and an ordained Church of Christ minister once told me that, "Christians have a tendency to kill their wounded." Or, in the context of our gospel lesson, try mightily to remove those they perceive as tares from their midst.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown-Taylor observed that we are told to leave the tares alone because if we don't, "we may run the risk of becoming tares

1. Echoes of Eternity, Dennis Kastens, CSS Publishing Co., Inc.

ourselves. It's one of the trickiest things that weeds do—to get the wheat so riled up and defensive that they start acting like weeds themselves—full of prickles, full of poison—good guys turned into bad guys trying to put the bad guys out of business.”²

No, our job, in a mixed field, is not to give ourselves to the enemy by devoting our energy to the destruction of the tares—**but to mind our own *business*—the business of bearing good fruit.** This entails practicing unconditional love and reconciling the world to God. Within the Christian community specifically, it is to resist the sin of judgmentalism. If we give ourselves to that, God will take care of the rest.

So, are you judgmental? If so, remember that God calls us to tend to our own fruit, our own wheat. We must use the seed that God plants in us to bring forth and produce that which will further God's reign on earth. And, by leaving the weeding to God, we are demonstrating our belief that the harvest, after all, is His.

AMEN

2. Barbara Brown-Taylor, “Why the Boss Said No,” in *Bread of Angels* (Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 149.