

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
July 20, 2008
Romans 8:18-27; Matthew 13:24-30

"A World of Woe and Weeds"

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

If you looked at the theme in the bulletin for this sermon, you might have said to yourself, "That really looks depressing". And in reality, you are partly right. The Epistle and Gospel readings for this week speak of very serious and weighty things. They remind us of the consequences of sin, of the reality of evil and of the work of the devil. But perhaps the sermon theme could be expanded to truly express all the thoughts of these readings which includes comfort and assurance as well. A World of Woe and Weeds is very alliterative. A World of Woe and Weeds, of Wheat and the Spirit is more comprehensive. May the Spirit of the Lord bless our meditation on His Word this day.

Woe

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." With these words the Apostle Paul begins an exposition on the consequences of sin in the world. In fact he says, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." In the later verses of the Epistle the apostle describes the creation as groaning in the pains of childbirth. This is a startling picture of the created order. And can the headlines of the present time fit these words. A world experiencing numerous "natural" catastrophes. Fires and floods. Pollution and the loss of resources. Much of our current concern about energy prices is part of the inescapable fact that our fossil fuel is a limited resource. Oh, there is still a lot of it there but it may be more difficult to extract. There is so much that could be said on this topic but let just one more example suffice—a recent series of articles on Lake Michigan in the newspaper showed how invasive plant and animal species have drastically altered the lake. Just walk along the algae infested shoreline sometime and see. The world we live in is not the garden of Eden from which our first parents were expelled following their sin. It is a world shaped by disaster and trouble from the great Flood of Noah's day to the continuing troubles of today. It is a world subject to decay—to death. The world is dying. This is not an environmental message—it is a theological message. The world is dying because of sin. This world longs for the revealing of the sons of God, to be set free. Does this affect us? Of course it does. We are part of that creation. We too suffer the results of sin in illness and disease, in trouble and finally in death. That is our lot. That is our woe. But remember those first words of the epistle: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory ..." Keep that thought in mind.

II. Weeds

If the woe of this world was not enough then there are the weeds. The Gospel lesson for today is another of a series of parables which Jesus spoke and it continues the agricultural theme of last week's parable of the sower and the seed. But the perspective and the point of comparison in this parable changes. The seed last week was the word, this week it is people—the people of God. The seed that is sown is good seed, the children of the kingdom.

But the devil is also at work sowing weeds among the wheat. An enemy has done this is how the master describes the deed. Many commentators have suggested that the weed referred to here is darnel, a grasslike weed that is noxious and persistent and which as it is growing looks just like wheat unless you look very closely. The roots get intertwined with the wheat. It is only when the heads appear that it is very evident what is the weed and what is the wheat. I read an interesting description which says that while the heads of wheat bow down because of the weight of the grain, the darnel grows up straight. It is almost as if it is arrogantly saying, come and get me. Now there is a parable for our time with the arrogance and self assurance of the children of the devil. And incidentally, I also came across an article stating that darnel has become one of the most persistent and damaging invasive foreign weeds on the plains of Saskatchewan and Alberta in Canada and in the wheat fields. Remember, the creation groans in travail.

So in the world, the wheat and the weeds grow up together. One of the tragedies of history has been when the church has attempted to rid the world of the weeds. Of course the other tragedy is when the world seeks to rid itself of the wheat. That is a continuing struggle. It is described well in the old saying “when the Lord builds a church, the devil sets up shop across the street, or in the parking lot.”

The struggle will always be there. The world will not be rid of the evil one, his evil deeds or his followers until the end of the world. For then the weeds will be pulled from the wheat and the judgment of the Lord will be sure and certain and complete. And the righteous will shine like the sun in glory.

III. Wheat and the Spirit

And that brings us to the hope in this text. There is the wheat. The wheat that is brought forth from the sowing of the good seed. Here there is a connection with last week's lesson. The Lord continues to sow the seed of His word, he continues to work his mercy and grace in our lives. His Son, according to the Gospel today, sows the seed of the righteous in the world by his redeeming work. And the word of God, the word of the Gospel, the promise in the Holy Sacraments of the church, strengthens and keeps us. What a blessed hope and assurance is there.

And let us not forget the Spirit as well. In the Epistle lesson, St. Paul reminds us of another

aspect of that hope. For the Spirit of the living God prays for us when we do not know what to say. The Holy Spirit prays most effectively, for His prayers are according to the will of God. The Lord does not forsake his own. He safely tends the field he has planted. He will preserve us unto the end.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory ... Do not forget the glory. Do not forget the victory. The Lord will bless the wheat, the good grain. The Lord will save his people.

Conclusion

Many years ago, Johann Sebastian Bach composed a motet based upon the words of the epistle for today. Its title is "Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf." The spirit also helps us in our weakness. He concludes that motet with the last stanza of Martin Luther's great hymn of the Holy Spirit, "Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord." What a fitting prayer that is for us as well:

Come, holy Fire, comfort true,
Grant us the will Your work to do
And in Your service to abide
Let trials turn us not aside.
Lord, by Your power prepare each heart,
And to our weakness strength impart
That bravely here we may contend,
Through life and death
to You, our Lord, ascend.
Alleluia, alleluia!

In Jesus' name. Amen.