

July 19, 2020

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wis 12:13, 16-19

Rom 8:26-27

Mt 13:24-30 (short form)

As I was preparing this homily, an ad for a weed killer came on the TV. The opening line of the ad was: “Weeds are downright little scoundrels”.

Back in the day when I was in high school in Philadelphia, there were zero co-ed Catholic high schools. They were either all-male or all-female. I have an uncle who had 6 daughters, all basketball players. They attended Little Flower High School, named for St Therese of Lisieux. Our extended family was sort of a basketball family, so I used to attend the games at Little Flower whenever I could. The fans of my cousins’ opponents used to take great delight in screaming: “Little Flower girls are weeds”.

I spent the first seven years of my career living and working in Chicago. I’ve never lived in a place where people are so fastidious about their lawns. The quickest way to become ostracized in a neighborhood is to allow your lawn to become weed-infested. In Chicago the definition of “weed-infested” is one weed. Every spring and fall I spent countless hours and dollars dumping chemicals on my lawn in order to escape the damning stares of the weed vigilantes.

Growing up in the arch-conservative archdiocese of Philadelphia I used to dread today’s gospel because it would invariably be followed by a fire and brimstone sermon designed to convince me that I was a weed and would therefore be going to hell. The fact that the preacher might be right is beside the point. I didn’t wanna hear it nor, do I suspect, do you.

So, in preparing this homily, I focused on trying to find the good news in today’s gospel which, after all, is what the gospels are supposed to be full of. I began by wondering whether weeds get a bad rap.

So I did a little reading-up on weeds. Weeds can have a good side: They keep topsoil from eroding away; they pull up water and nutrients from the ground, making it easier for the wheat to get at them; they help control insects; and more.

The owner of the field in today's gospel didn't attack the weeds. He told his workers to leave them be for the moment in order to protect the well-being of the wheat. In Jesus's part of the world, the most common weed that grows in a wheat field is called darnel. The problem with darnel is that it resembles wheat, especially in the early stages of growth. It's difficult to distinguish darnel from wheat, even for an experienced farmhand. A smart landowner wouldn't dare try to separate such a weed from the wheat prematurely—nor would a compassionate Jesus.

After all, isn't it Jesus who sees tax collectors and sinners as wheat while the Pharisees and Scribes see them as weeds?

Not to make things more complicated, but consider this: Aren't each and every one of us composed of both weeds and wheat? If that's true, and I believe it is, then isn't it up to us to try get rid of our weeds and grow our wheat?

Of course that's impossible to do on our own. That's why God gives us help:

- He gave us His only Son.
- He gives us Church, a community in which we are charged with helping each other along the road to the harvest.
- He gives us the gift of His Word in the Scriptures.
- He gives us the gift of Eucharist in which we have the opportunity to unite ourselves with Jesus, physically and spiritually.
- He gives us His gift of Spirit, His living presence among us.
- He gives us His sacraments in which He intimately participates in our lives.
- He gives us the gifts of family, friends, each other, and the world community at large to give and receive nourishment, and also weed killer when needed.
- He gives us the gift of prayer so we can keep in touch with Him.

To me, the key point in today's gospel is the farmer's decision to wait, because in the immortal words of Yogi Berra: "It ain't over til it's over". That, sisters and brothers, is not only good news—it's great news. So until it's over, may we all accept the plethora of gifts offered us in love by our compassionate God—gifts meant to nourish our wheat and gently dissolve our weeds.

