

Inextricably Bound Together (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

sermon at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

Preached by Lindsey Seegers 7/23/23

Last spring, I attended this enormous, elegant party. It was on the rooftop of the Hilton, overlooking the water, which was sparkling blue that day. It was early evening, the sun was golden and glistening, a live band was playing for the hundreds of guests; everybody held champagne, donned suits and gowns, and there was this festive aura in the air of a special night ahead.

We even had complimentary valet parking, which always feels so fancy to me, like, "Am I in the right room? How did I get an invite?"

I saw a man with a large camera, and realized he was the event photographer that I had been looking for, so I went up to him, I extended my hand, "Hi, I'm Lindsey!" and he (we'll call him Photographer Paul) greeted me warmly until... his eyes looked past me. Then his face shifted. He pointed across the room to an underweight man with scraggly salt-and-pepper hair, a patchy beard, wearing oversized clothing and a ball cap, rolling his bicycle and backpack through the lobby. Paul said to me, in this knowing way, this way of, you get it, we are the same, Paul shook his head: "Can you believe a *homeless* guy snuck in here? I'm going to tell somebody."

[pause]

In our gospel reading today, well, it's one of those uncomfortable ones. It's one of those parables where, I hope a newbie does not encounter it in *their* very first reading of the Bible. The wheat and the weeds, the plucking, the dividing,

end times, God as the Judge... This is not God-image we Episcopalians understand or promote. That makes it a more challenging parable to digest.

The essence is this: the weeds and the wheat are growing together, but the owner of the field understands that they *need* to grow together. Because the destruction of one can lead to the demise of the other. Jesus says, "Let both of them grow together until the harvest."

A closer read of this parable reveals a cautionary tale, *as well as* one intended to offer encouragement. Like the parable, we have this tendency, as humans, to split our world in two: believer and non believer, sinners and Saints, republicans and democrats... When we actually *need* each other to survive.

I think about how we *think* we know who, in our society, is good and who is bad. Whether we admit it to ourselves, on some level, most of us (hey, I'm guilty!) think we are qualified to judge right and wrong, discern the good people from the bad people, based on our understanding of morality or justice.

For two decades now, I have volunteered or worked directly with individuals seeking support from social services. Those who come to ask for help are too often presumed to be facing such challenges because *they* made bad choices, grew up in unsupportive homes, came from bad places. People for whom we've created dehumanizing labels—often rooted in racism—to keep them in their place—and distinct from ourselves.

I spent 3½ years working with people who were coming to my program straight out of prison. When I worked in these kitchens, our culinary students shared that being in the kitchen was a new kind of adrenaline, a new kind of rush that replaced addiction. The addiction, the craving, now quenched by the excitement of creativity, culinary art, self-expression. What seemed to be the threat, the constant craving for excitement and danger, became the *very thing* that made them successful in their culinary careers.

What seemed to be a threat became a source of fuel.

The people I work with now are the people for whom our society tends to have the least sympathy. Not mothers, not families, not children. The singles. The untethered adults, living outside, living in their cars, or sleeping in a barracks-like shelter. These days, I encounter a community judged by society to be nearly worse than the justice-impacted: those experiencing homelessness.

I work now for Voices of Our City, a nonprofit also dubbed “San Diego’s homeless choir”. We prefer to call ourselves a creative community for adults experiencing homelessness. Our headquarters is in fact at Saint Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral.

Like St. Andrew’s, this is a congregation *and* space welcoming the historically unwelcomed, the unsheltered, indoors.

But our two congregations operate distinct from many. Since soup kitchens began in 1929, many churches-turned-charities, followed the template: creating outdoor lines for food and clothing, keeping people at arms’ length, isolated, joined only by the act of waiting and waiting and waiting for a serving of help: not often in the form or amount actually needed to emerge beyond their current challenges. The shelters, from what I’ve heard from my choir members, can feel like prison: you’re told when to go to sleep in these noisy, crowded congregate quarters—not to mention the likelihood of yelling, theft, or assault. When you’re kept together, you’re kept controlled, you’re kept in line.

Voices of Our City started out by inviting the unsheltered community indoors, with food, friendship, music, dignity. It wasn't easy to find a physical location that would permit this approach of radical hospitality among a seemingly unpredictable group. Because America's social service system is meant to keep people at arms' length—that folks needing help might not get dependent on help.

But *this* group, this choir, this community of formerly unsheltered creatives were offered a place for friendship and self-expression. They were offered the freedom to gather in unity, in community, to speak the truth. And the initial refrain of our unhoused brothers and sisters was this: "we don't have a voice".

What happened since in these now seven years of singing, songwriting, and advocating in harmony with one another grew an unstoppable power. The Choir made it onto America's Got Talent, twice, winning the Golden Buzzer award for their own song "Sounds of The Sidewalk."

What seemed to be a threat became a source of fuel.

The voices and message of this choir became—and remains—fuel for good. The very same adults labeled "troublemakers" sleeping in their cars become changemakers on the stage. It is not so simple to weed out what and who is "good", is "in". Good and bad, constructive and destructive, are inexplicable bound together.

What seems to be a threat become a source of fuel.

The Dutch priest Henry Nouwen wrote: "Christ's appearance in our midst has made it undeniably clear that changing the human heart and changing human society are not separate tasks, but are as interconnected as the two beams of the cross."

[pause]

That fancy party at the Hilton I told you about? I was there for work. It was the National Conflict Resolution Center's annual Peacemakers Award ceremony. Last year's Community Peacemakers' Award went to Voices of Our City Choir.

When Paul the photographer spied the "homeless-looking man" with his bicycle in the ballroom and pointed out to me that *surely* this man had snuck into *our* elegant event uninvited, I confess to you, brothers and sisters, that it gave me a little pleasure when I replied to Paul, "Yes, *that* is D-Rock. He was homeless, and he's here as tonight's guest of honor... You're here to photograph him receiving the Peacemakers Award."

[slow] Cue the cringe, tail-between-the-legs moment.

The wheat and the weeds are growing together, almost *indistinguishable* from one another as they emerge from the soil. *We* are in this world together, whether this world is the planet, our country, our community, or our congregations: we *must* grow together.

My pleasure in setting Paul the Photographer straight was not delight in his embarrassment. And, oh mortified he *was*! My glee was witnessing *this*

moment in his life. Knowing that his sight would never be the same, and I was there to witness this transformation.

Paul apologized profusely, and I got to share with him that this part of the purpose of Voices of Our City Choir: to change the perception of homelessness. And I congratulated him on being the first of the night.

A few minutes later, as I watched our choir members, with their champagne flutes of sparkling cider, dancing together and singing along to the band on that glorious rooftop overlooking the expanse of glittering sea, I witnessed a moment I will never forget.

Our choir member, D-Rock, was perched on a bench, and , there, kneeling, *kneeling on the cement ground*, before him was Paul. I could not hear their words in that moment, although they each told me their account afterwards, but I saw Paul's humility and courage in admitting his judgment of this man, this choir member, this peacemaker. And I saw the shift for D-Rock as he received this message of acceptance, this meeting of eyes and hearts, the softening between the two of them, and depth of this exchange of grace, humility, forgiveness.

The wheat and the weeds must grow together, and we *do not have* the sight to discern the two. The parable of the weeds is a cautionary tale about the living, the flourishing in our midst at risk of destruction when we, foolishly, try to put judgment in our hands. When we reduce our worldview to such sharp contrasts, we often lose the ability to see our collective best interests.

Let us go out into the world this week seeing the scenes that baffle us, and use them as fuel to strive towards understanding and fairness towards one another.

I leave you today with this reflection from Howard Thurman's Meditations of the Heart:

"Every judgment that I pass upon my fellow [humans] is a self-judgment. Judgment can only be whole and creative when it takes place in a context of full and absolute knowledge. Full and absolute knowledge, even of one's self is never possible, how can it be... to others? Again, it becomes us to say with true humility, 'Judgment belongs to God'; and one can only pray, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart!' "

Search us, O God, and know our hearts.

Amen.

Trouble in the text : the wheat and weeds are growing together—who is to decide to uproot the weeds?

Trouble in the world : we think we know, we think we are equipped with a worldview to know who's in and who's out

grace in the text : "let them both grow together until the harvest"

grace in the world : our common good; better together; "what seemed to be a threat becomes a source of fuel"