

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Matthew's gospel knows little compromise: sheep or goats, wheat or weeds, good or evil. Finding the good news of God's love for all people, for all creation, can be a challenge in this book. Today's gospel is no exception. Jesus interprets a parable for the disciples; he announces that all evildoers will be thrown into the furnace of fire, while the righteous will shine like the sun. The "Son of Man" will judge the world. Jesus' parable is a genuine metaphor—it is best viewed as a whole: the kingdom of believers has the same potential as those of the world to do good and to do evil. Jesus' allegorical interpretation encourages believers to strive for righteousness, and emphasizes God as judge.

St. Paul, however, in his letter to the church at Rome focuses on God as merciful judge. He proclaims that all creation will be freed from decay and receive redemption. Paul reminds us our hope lies with God, our parent through a spirit of adoption. This two-part picture of God as both judge and giver of mercy began with last Sunday's readings and will recur again across the next four Sundays. In some cases the God of mercy is highlighted in Paul's letter, at other times in the gospel. This good news, however, is always present!

The exercise of judgment and mercy reflects God's emphasis on justice over fairness. A fair God condemns those who do evil. A just God moves beyond fairness to justice, peace, and reconciliation. As evil doers, sinners, one and all, we are grateful for God's justice towards us and all people.

Let Us Be Gathered

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
who forgives all our sin,
whose mercy endures forever.
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Most merciful God,
we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.
We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us.
Forgive us, renew us, and lead us,
so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.
Amen.

God, who is rich in mercy,
loved us even when we were dead in sin,

and made us alive together with Christ.
By grace you have been saved.

In the name of † Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.
Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit,
that Christ may live in your hearts through faith.
Amen.

Gathering Song

From Lexington, South Carolina, our gathering song this week is lead by St. Stephen Lutheran Church.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/SjERd71rCXM>.

- 1 *When morning gilds the skies,
my heart awaking cries:
may Jesus Christ be praised!
When evening shadows fall,
this rings my curfew call:
may Jesus Christ be praised!*

- 2 *When mirth for music longs,
this is my song of songs:
may Jesus Christ be praised!
God's holy house of prayer
has none that can compare
with "Jesus Christ be praised!"*

- 3 *No lovelier antiphon
in all high heav'n is known
than "Jesus Christ be praised!"
There to the eternal Word
the eternal psalm is heard:
oh, Jesus Christ be praised!*

- 4 *Let all of humankind
in this their concord find:
may Jesus Christ be praised!
Let all the earth around
ring joyous with the sound:
may Jesus Christ be praised!*

- 5 *Sing, sun and stars of space,
sing, all who see his face,
sing, "Jesus Christ be praised!"
God's whole creation o'er,
today and evermore
shall Jesus Christ be praised!*

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray.

Faithful God, most merciful judge,
you care for your children with firmness and compassion.
By your Spirit nurture us who live in your kingdom,
that we may be rooted in the way of your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from Isaiah:

⁶Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel,
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
⁷Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,
let them declare and set it forth before me.
Who has announced from of old the things to come?
Let them tell us what is yet to be.
⁸Do not fear, or be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
You are my witnesses!
Is there any god besides me?
There is no other rock; I know not one. (Isaiah 44)

*The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.*

A reading from the Psalms:

¹¹Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart to revere your name.
¹²I will thank you, O Lord my God, with all my heart,
and glorify your name forevermore.
¹³For great is your love toward me;
you have delivered me from the pit of death.
¹⁴The arrogant rise up against me, O God, and a band of violent people seeks my life;
they have not set you before their eyes.
¹⁵But you, O Lord, are gracious and full of compassion,
slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth.
¹⁶Turn to me and have mercy on me;
give your strength to your servant, and save the child of your handmaid.

¹⁷Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame; because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me. (Psalm 86)

A reading from Romans:

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8)

*Word of God. Word of life.
Thanks be to God.*

*The holy gospel according to Matthew.
Glory to you, O Lord.*

²⁴[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 13)

*The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.*

Reflection on the Readings

We certainly know the groaning sounds of weeping and gnashing teeth right now. Indeed, in this difficult time, the whole creation seems to be groaning. And, amid signs of awful division between people in our land, we are tempted to try to weed the field ourselves—to try tear out, apprehend, silence, ostracize, banish, boycott, and eliminate whoever we think is a “weed.”

It has become a part of our culture to ask the questions, “Who will you call out today? Who must you cancel? Who is the weed that must be stopped?” And today’s parable seem to connect well with this type of culture. The disciples, after all, want Jesus to tell them more about the weeds.

What we see at the beginning, though, is that the point of the parable is not ultimately to talk about weeds. Its point is to talk about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God is, in fact, the main focus of Jesus’ teaching throughout Matthew’s account of the gospel.

As used by Matthew, the “kingdom of heaven” marks a difference between the realm of God’s kingdom and the kingdom of Roman emperor. As the people in the first century Mediterranean would have experienced it, the emperor’s kingdom is on earth. The kingdom of heaven is where God reigns. And so when Jesus, son of God, comes to earth, this act represents an in-breaking of God’s kingdom into earthly empires. When we understand this, we understand that the gospel is explicitly a political document. The writer is proposing an alternative understanding of the world, one that would directly oppose the political leaders of his time. As such, clear lines needed to be drawn. Which kingdom will prevail? Whose empire will you participate in?

This choosing of allegiance—to God or to the emperor—is intentionally divisive. Jesus began by telling the crowd: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.” Immediately, the crowd is alerted to the fact that there is opposition to the kingdom of heaven; there is an enemy who seeks to do harm.

Yet, choices like this are dangerous and have material implications. Forced-choice outcomes such as “us versus them” or “body or soul” or “savage versus civilized” or “good versus evil” are examples of the ways in which we attempt to simplify our world into two realms.

When we reduce our vision of God’s world to such sharp contrasts, we often lose the ability to see our collective best interests and common goals. We can certainly witness this in the polarities of our current political environment where similar lines have been drawn—“Republican or Democrat” or “liberals versus conservatives.” Such distinctions often overshadow the shared desire to identify the common good and health of all citizens (such as wearing face coverings) and most often result in conflict that can easily escalate into violence.

The solution to this tendency to divide our world and our humanity into two so that we more easily dominate or eliminate the other is found in today’s parable. Jesus teaches: “Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

The owner of the field understands that once they are together, the weeds and wheat must grow in union since the destruction of one can lead to the demise of the other. Likewise, our tendency to split our world into two—"believer or nonbeliever" or "sinners or saints"—is not useful. We are in this world together, whether this world is the planet, our country, our community, or our congregations, we must grow together and allow God and the angels to do the separating in God's own time. (Indeed, as we now know today from study of botany and biology, it wasn't the bearded darnel weed itself that was so evil. Rather, it was a toxic fungus that easily grows on the weed. Maybe that evil fungus will be what actually is separated out by God's angels?)

Meanwhile, we should acknowledge that we need each other to survive. In Romans 14:17, Paul describes God's kingdom as righteousness, peace, and joy. In order for us to see a world that can be characterized as such, we must acknowledge that the causes of sin are not simply our personal struggles, but more so our societal ills. For instance, the causes of poverty—war, greed, selfishness, arrogance—are sin. It is not for us to judge one another or to separate ourselves from each other. The life that the kingdom of God brings to us is one in which we must live peaceably and compassionately with all, recognizing that we (the good and the evil, the saint and the sinner) are necessary for each other's health, well-being, and survival.

Hymn of the Day

"Build Us Up Lord" (ELW #670) is our hymn of the day this week. Follow along as St. Paul Lutheran Church in Gross Pointe Farms, Michigan, leads our singing. (Gross Pointe Farms is a suburb on the northeastern side of Detroit at the shore of Lake St. Clair.)

Here is the video link: https://youtu.be/IEJw5_wGXYE.

1 *Build us up, Lord, build us up;
set in us a strong foundation.
Lead us to do your holy will;
form and shape your new creation.
Build us up, Lord, build us up;
as we guide and teach each other,
help us to share your love with the world:
ev'ry sister, ev'ry brother.*

Refrain

*Growing in Christ, we plant seeds for the kingdom;
we follow in faith what's begun!
Lord, set in our hearts the pow'r of your word
to spread the news of your Son!*

2 *Build us up, Lord, build us up;
let our lives reflect your glory.
Cast away all our doubts and fears;
help us tell the world your story.
Build us up, Lord, build us up;*

*help us bear good fruit for you,
Lord, give us vision and keep us sure.
Grant us faith that's steadfast and true. Refrain*

Prayers of Intercession

Confident of God's care for us in the midst of the world's sufferings, we join together in the power of the Spirit to pray for the church, the earth, the world, and all who are in need, responding to the words "Teach us your way" with the phrase "you are full of compassion."

A brief silence.

God of the church, we praise you for sowing the good seed of the gospel throughout the world, and we mourn that at this time many Christians cannot assemble to nurture one another for growth in the faith. Tend your people; support bishops, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders; give us strength through your word. Lead seminaries to plan appropriately for the fall semester.

A brief silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

God of the earth, we praise you for a wondrous creation, and we mourn that many lands and seas are groaning for rebirth. Nurture our green spaces and national parks; send rain where there is drought; protect engendered animals from poachers. Show us how to care for your earth and its creatures.

A brief silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

God of the nations, we praise you for the good that has been given us in this country, and we mourn that many people here are poor and dispossessed, that we have allowed racism to distort our society, that violence breaks out in our land. Lead us to form communities in which all people are equal and where disputes are settled without violence. Save us from preserving a past that has been harmful to many. Bring an end to warfare around the world, and mend the torn fabric of humankind with your truth and mercy.

A brief silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

God of humankind, we praise you for wherever health and happiness prevail, and we mourn that many people suffer. Each day thousands more contract the virus; renters are facing eviction; medical workers are exhausted; some of the sick have no access to health care; countless people are broken by sorrows. Open our hearts to your children who suffer in any way, and show us how to serve them.

A brief silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

God of the seasons, we praise you for summertime, and we mourn that this year many hopes and expectations are denied. Give relief to those who suffer from the heat. Protect travelers from infection.

Guard our children. Give rest to those with no vacation time, hope to those who are unemployed, and patience to all who must endure this difficult time.

A brief silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

God, you are Abba, our loving Father. You are our Sovereign of our lives, our Redeemer, the Rock on which we build. Hear us as we offer the petitions of our hearts.

A longer time of silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

God of eternity, we praise you for all who have died in the faith. We mourn our own beloved dead. At the end, bring us all into the shining light of your presence.

A brief silence.

O God, teach us your way: you are full of compassion.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Offering Prayer

Merciful God,
as grains of wheat scattered upon the hills
were gathered together to become one bread,
so let your church be gathered together
from the ends of the earth into your kingdom,
for yours is the glory through Jesus Christ, now and forever.
Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Sending Song

Julie Grindle, Assistant to the Bishop in the Upstate New York Synod, leads us in singing today's sending song, "For the Fruit of All Creation" (ELW #679).

Here is the video link: <https://www.facebook.com/upstatenysynod/videos/733112327500915/?t=635>.

(Note: The video may start with sound muted. Click or tap anywhere on the video picture to start the sound. If that doesn't work, hover your mouse pointer in the bottom right-hand area to click on the speaker symbol and turn on the sound. If you would like to hear more about this hymn and get to know a little more about Julie, use this link: <https://www.facebook.com/upstatenysynod/videos/733112327500915/>)

*For the fruit of all creation, thanks be to God.
For these gifts to every nation, thanks be to God.
For the plowing, sowing, reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping,
future needs in earth's safe-keeping, thanks be to God.*

*In the just reward of labor, God's will is done.
In the help we give our neighbor, God's will is done.
In our worldwide task of caring for the hungry and despairing,
in the harvests we are sharing, God's will is done.*

*For the harvest of the Spirit, thanks be to God.
For the good we all inherit, thanks be to God.
For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us,
most of all that love has found us, thanks be to God.*

Sending Prayer

Let us pray.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

Benediction

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord's face shine on us with grace and mercy.
The Lord look upon us with favor and ✠ give us peace.
Amen.