

“Beware the gaps in the lectionary!” A Biblical studies professor of mine once said that. Beware those places in the Sunday readings where verses get skipped over.

Okay, so if you are following along in the generic printed bulletins, you can’t tell that’s what happened a couple of minutes ago when Bruce read the Gospel. If you are reading from the online version, though, you can see the Scripture reference for this morning’s text is Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. Verses 31-35, right there in the middle of the passage, are left out.

And who, you may ask, decided to do this? The North American Consultation on Common Texts, in collaboration with the International English Language Liturgical Consultation, decided to do this! And they know what they are doing, right?

I mean, all that’s in those five verses, between the story and Jesus’ explanation of it are a couple of “the kingdom of heaven is like” sayings, and a note that he liked teaching in parables. They don’t seem to have anything to do with this parable about a carefully planted field that gets contaminated under cover of darkness, and the meaning that his disciples, and you and I, are to draw from it.

Still, I’m not sure they’ve done us any favors by taking that short cut to the tidy wrapping up of a story that on the surface seems pretty simple but, if we sit with it a bit longer, pretty challenging.

So right on the heels of last week’s parable of the sower, in which God is this crazy helicopter sower flinging seeds like fuschia glitter, every which way (and thank you, KC, for that unforgettable image; for those of you who didn’t hear it, check out the YouTube video from last Sunday) – seeds that, in the places they take hold, produce a superabundant yield – comes this one about another sower who is as meticulous as the first was profligate.

Jesus tells us “he sowed good seed in his field”. And I just bet that field looked like the one I passed on my way up the 101 from Camarillo to Thousand Oaks this past Tuesday afternoon – such perfect rows, stretching into the distance, planted, I’m sure, at precisely the right time. This sower is no small game. He is experienced; he knows what he’s doing. He probably has a fabulous irrigation system installed, too.

Now unbeknownst to him, a troll, with no intention other than to do harm, sneaks in during the night and does the helicopter thing with seeds of an aggressive weed. Weeks later, *everything* comes up. In, around, and between those tidy rows of beautiful wheat, darnel, which is like ryegrass, is running rampant.

The sower's horrified field workers ask if they should get out there, right away, and start weeding. But no, says this farmer. No. That is too risky. It is too easy to pull up the wheat by accident. Let's just wait. We are going to wait until the field has fully grown. Then, first we'll get rid of all those weeds. And then we'll harvest the wheat.

And now we've reached that gap in the lectionary. Where five verses are left out. You would never know it, because the next thing we hear is that Jesus is done talking, and he and his disciples have gone into a house, and they are begging him to explain the parable of the weeds. Which Jesus does, in straight-up allegorical style, saying who is who, and how the sorting out is going to take place at the end of the age.

Causes of sin and evildoers, i.e., the weeds, will be thrown into the fire, where there will weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the wheat, the righteous ones, will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. And there you go! The only thing missing is the bow on top.

At the same time, though...isn't that tidy little ending a bit disconcerting? Maybe a little too simple?

Let me share a couple of things with you that I think it helps us all to know about Matthew and this passage. First, the community in and for whom he is writing is a mixed body of predominantly Jewish believers, probably in Antioch, sometime around the year 90 CE. This community has witnessed the destruction of the Temple. And this community is struggling mightily with difference and division. So the field, the world, they are inhabiting feels really weedy. What does it mean, for them, to be obedient in that confusing, challenging environment? How are they to hold together in the midst of so much uncertainty? And danger?

Second, Matthew is very clear. Jesus' parables are about the Kingdom of Heaven. Which means that they are about a future reality when God's purpose is fulfilled, and the Son of Man comes to judge the world. His account of Jesus' teaching is shaped by that frame. That interpretation section that takes place in the house? That is generally regarded as Matthew's own editorial addition. Why did he add it? Maybe because he felt compelled to resolve this dilemma with which the parable, left uninterpreted, would leave his community. And us. This dilemma of having to accept the continuing presence of weeds, of evil, in the world, as simply "the way things are".

The story suggests that no matter how sure we are about who or what is good; no matter how faithful we try to be; it is not for us to clean up the field. It is not yours and my job to decide who or what needs to go, and get rid of them. Our job is to recognize our limits. Our job is to tolerate the uncertainty of the present moment.

Which makes me then wonder whether the North American Consultation on Common Texts and the International English Language Liturgical Consultation felt similarly compelled to rescue all of us from this dilemma. By making sure we go directly to Matthew's tidy allegorical interpretation, instead of being sidetracked by those pesky five verses between the parable and the interpretation. Verses that contain mini-parables about other puzzling and unexpected and unmanageable goings-on in the kingdom of heaven. As in, the kingdom of heaven being like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge tree in which the birds make their nests (when everyone knows that mustard is only, ever, a shrub, that only gets this high); and the kingdom being like a tiny bit of yeast (typically a symbol of corruption), a tiny bit of yeast that a woman hides in a ridiculous amount of flour that ends up leavening it all. These five verses about crazy impacts of tiny, ambiguous agents are bound to distract us from solving the puzzle of the parable of the weeds.

But as I said earlier, I'm not sure that saving us from some lack of tidy resolution is all that helpful. Because here is the thing:

Being told that everything is going to come out right in the end surely brings some comfort. But it can seem pretty thin soup when you are, at the moment, feeling choked off by weeds. And I don't know about you, but being told that the bad people will burn and the good people will sing is not all that comforting for me.

Why? Because I find myself wondering, sometimes, whether I really can tell the difference. We, and this field, this world that we inhabit, are more complicated than that, aren't we?

But if you and I hear this parable up to the point about how the farmer is determined to let the weeds and the wheat grow together because he is unwilling to risk even the smallest bit of his crop; if we resist jumping to interpretation, and instead, just sit with that, and let it work on us, we realize that the field is *us*. And we are a pretty mixed-up place. So is the field that is the church. So is the field that is our country. So is the field that is our world.

No matter how hard you and I try, and how carefully we think we have planted, evil is everywhere mixed in with the good and root systems are pretty entangled. It can be incredibly hard to separate them out. And when we do try to uproot and destroy what's corrupt, often it is wrapped in and around precious and beautiful and worthy things. Things that truly do constitute the kingdom of heaven.

The really hard part IS to tolerate that ambiguity. To know what we don't know. To realize that the work of discernment takes time and patience. And to remember

that while you and I are in that gap, so to speak, the gap between the story and the interpretation, the gap between a confusing and challenging present and a future resolution, the gap that is in itself a kind of parable, we are nonetheless treasured. We are of inestimable value to the field that is this world.

And to the One who is determined that we not be lost. To the One who, in spite of everything, it seems, is willing to wait.