

Eighth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Tattoos, Wheat and Weeds"  
Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19; Matthew 13:24-50, 36-43

July 22-23, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

A female Anglican priest, wife of a retired police officer, mother of 3, grandmother of 2, is the recipient and the cause of hate mail in Twitter and Facebook messages, sent to Canterbury Cathedral in England. The cathedral has just introduced Rev. Wendy Dalrymple as the community's new "precentor" (which I had to look up), meaning she's now the lead priest in charge of planning worship. She has a glowing history of enabling her former congregation to flourish because of her inclusive ministry of outreach and hospitality. Yet some people are becoming unglued and are sending quite uncharitable messages to the powers-that-be, because Mother Dalrymple's PR photo shows both her arms adorned with tattoo "sleeves," ink from shoulder to wrist. One person furiously tweeted, "The tats are disgusting and should bar her from any religious role."<sup>1</sup> Going with the theme of today's Gospel, I'm thinking that critic has judged this priest as a **weed** to be uprooted rather than **wheat** to be celebrated. All because of her tattoos.

The article I read doesn't describe the artwork, but I examined closely the photo of the sleeve on the priest's left arm. It is the picture of a woman with a halo holding **a jar with a lid**, and I am betting this is a tattoo of Mary Magdalene, which is fascinating, because July 22, this Saturday, is Mary Magdalene's special day on the Church calendar! When Pastor Mark & I were away on my sabbatical, we saw many such images of Mary Magdalene, who, as Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us, went to the tomb with other women on Easter morning to wash and anoint Jesus' body with **ointment**, which would be contained in a jar. Also for centuries she's been confused with both the anonymous woman who anointed Jesus' head and with Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus' feet while He was still alive, so on all these counts Mary Magdalene is often shown in religious artwork with a jar of ointment.

So let me just say: the Anglican priest in question doesn't just have any ol' tattoo: she has religious artwork. But in some people's minds, her appearance identifies her as weed rather than wheat, someone to be rooted out of the community entirely rather than welcomed as a spiritual leader. So: what kind of

people do **we** think of and treat as weeds invading the field of faith? We don't literally spray them with Round Up, of course, but there are subtler yet equally effective ways of getting rid of persons whose presence makes us uncomfortable or whom we don't feel "belong." "Heaven forbid," we say, but sadly, it does happen.

In St. Matthew's Gospel this parable of the wheat and the weeds comes right after the parable of the sower and the seed that we heard last week. Maybe Jesus told it to explain why the seed sown by Him, the seed of the Word, the seed of faith, doesn't take root in every single heart. Why sometimes it gets lost, or fried by the sun, or strangled by thorns, in the lingo of the story. So Jesus tells us that there is a force in this world that wants to **eliminate** or at least **reduce** the harvest of God's Kingdom. And that enemy, that devil, that evil one, is the "wicked foe" to whom Martin Luther refers in his beautiful morning and evening prayers: "Let your holy angels take charge of us, that the wicked foe have no power over us."

Sadly, let's remember that the wicked foe's most diabolical disguise is as an angel of light. Let's remember, Lucifer means *lightbearer* (just like Christopher means *Christ-bearer*). So this parable cautions us **not to judge by outward appearances** (including tattoos!). They can be deceiving. Botanists tells us that wheat and another plant called bearded darnel, are look-alikes until wheat kernels form in the ear. Wheat becomes life-giving bread; bearded darnel is poisonous and will kill you. (Fun fact, especially if you're a forager: the roots of beautiful Queen Anne's lace, a form of wild carrot, are edible. But before you take a bite, make sure you haven't mistaken poison hemlock for Queen Anne's lace. They're look-alikes. Eating or drinking poison hemlock will kill you. Just ask Socrates.)

The Church-with-a-capital-C, Christianity, has a long history of ignoring the caution of this parable NOT to judge by appearances, and NOT to root out supposed weeds among the wheat. The women identified as witches and either burned at the stake or drowned or cast out into the wilderness to fend for themselves and die, were often herbalists who used herbs to heal injuries, cure diseases, address maladies, and alleviate human suffering. The inquisitors' ignorance and not the victims' supposed pact with the devil led to a verdict of guilty. What the religious authorities did not understand they judged to

be evil. And they enacted what others have said, throughout history, “You’re so wrong we have to kill you.”

In a sermon a couple weeks ago I asked for everyday examples of holiness, and one of the answers from the pew was kindness. Our first lesson today from the Wisdom of Solomon (12:19a) says of God:

*...you have taught your people  
that the righteous must be kind.*

That message is echoed by another pastor with a double sleeve of tattoos. His name is Pastor Grant Myerholtz whose church is in the small town of Hartwell, Georgia. His church is nominally Baptist but acts independently. At least one fellow pastor in town judges Pastor Myerholtz to be a weed rather than wheat. That judgment doesn’t seem to be because of his tattoos but because he preaches a Gospel of welcome to all and even prayed a prayer of blessing at a local Pride festival. He states his case simply: **“We have the easiest job on the planet as Christians if we want to accept it. That is simply to love everybody.”**<sup>2</sup>

Climbing up onto a moral dais, donning a black robe of judgment, banging a judge’s gavel on someone’s head will never qualify as love. **Labeling** someone as a weed, **treating** someone like a weed, will never qualify as love. The devil rejoices when Christians themselves shut the door of community to those on the outside looking in. It’s then that those who may have come to faith are alienated from the Gospel and dismiss Christianity as an exclusive club of self-congratulating hypocrites. None of us wants to be part of a club that doesn’t want us, after all. Evangelism, sharing the Gospel, calls for humility. I am humble when I remember I am a saint and a sinner at the same time, in need of a Savior as badly as everybody else on this planet.

Another important point: Carl Jung observed that our harshest criticism of others is often a projection of the flaws we’d see in ourselves if we’d only look closely enough. But they’re so scary or repulsive we refuse to acknowledge them. There are weeds growing in our own hearts that the Holy Spirit would like to help us root out – but first we have to be open **to** God’s grace, **by** God’s grace.

When we're bathing ourselves in Word and Sacrament, when we're in better, more gracious sync with ourselves and with God, we can catch ourselves being judgmental, at least some of the time.

Hopefully the Lord will help us catch the judgmental words **before** we speak, while they're still just haughty thoughts in our head. Hopefully the Lord will change my heart so I can ask, "Have I ever walked a mile in this person's moccasins?" "Am I treating this person I'm judging as a beloved child of God?" "Am I removing the beam from my own eye before pointing out the splinter in somebody else's?" "Am I guilty of judging what I don't understand?" "Am I actually judging this thing, this person, this behavior, because it, he or she threatens me on some level?" "Am I remembering that I am a saint and a sinner at the same time, in continual need of redemption, no less than anybody else who walks this earth?"

Back to Mary Magdalene: we don't know all that much about her, but we do know she was very sick and Jesus made her well; she was broken and Jesus made her whole. The world treated her like a weed, but Jesus treated her like wheat. According to the Fourth Gospel, she became "the apostle to the apostles," the first one to whom our risen Lord Jesus appeared, and the one whom He entrusted to tell the others. We can only imagine that ever after she lived a life of joy, gratitude, faith-filled service. Mary Magdalene is a great reminder that God is the only One who can judge from the outside looking in.

Ultimately, God is the One responsible for the harvest. We have essentially one job. It requires that we take off our judge's robe and put down our gavel. **"We have the easiest job on the planet as Christians if we want to accept it. That is simply to love everybody."**<sup>3</sup> Amen.

<sup>1</sup>"Tattooed reverend gets hate online as Canterbury Cathedral defends her appointment to leadership role," *Fox News* online (July 20, 2023).

<sup>2</sup>Alison Miller, "A small-town Georgia preacher fills pews by leaving no one out," *Washington Post* on-line (July 9, 2023).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*