

**16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 17, 2011
10 AM and 5:30 PM liturgies**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

It's summer. And I believe we all have a deep-seated biological and psychological desire to slow down, to experience the world in simpler ways. For many of us, this will include our experience of faith.

But as I'm sure you are all already aware, we are in the middle of the parable season in Matthew's gospel. Today we have not one more (like last week), but three different parables offered for our consternation. Parables often complicate faith. They are not, by definition, simple.

Peter Rollins, a name you may not be familiar with, has written a delightful and challenging book of parables called *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales* (Paraclete Books, 2009). He offers offers us this caution. "Our religious world is awash with a vast sea of writing and talks designed to make the truth of faith clear, concise and palatable.... Parables subvert this desire to make faith simple and understandable. They do not offer

the reader clarity, for they refuse to be captured in the net of a single interpretation and instead demand our eternal return to their words, our wrestling with them, and our puzzling over them.”

I am now going to defy Dr. Rollins’ admonition and try to be clear and concise as I point out ever so briefly just what can be so disconcerting about Jesus’ use of parables. Remember, first, that parables are not intended to give us new information about our world. These three little stories are not about gardening tips, or cooking lessons.

The longest of the parables is about the good grain and the weeds. Or if you like, in the older formulation, it is about the wheat and the tares (that’s spelled t-a-r-e-s). Sr. Barbara Reid, O.P., in her *America* column titles her piece: “The Wisdom of the Weeds.” And there is a simple wisdom not immediately apparent.

In the words of the master in this story, Jesus (and by analogy, Jesus’ God) urges the slaves to do two things. First they are to let the evil one’s weeds grow; let them be; take the bad with the good. Let the field be what it is—and without worry or need to intervene. Second, they are to acknowledge that at a later time (actually the time of the final judgment, it turns out), God’s angels

will sort things out. No human beings need worry about how to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. That's god's call—and God's alone. And God, as we know from other parables, is strange! (Listen again to today's readings from Wisdom and St. Paul. God judges quite differently than most of us.)

Most disciples—including those first hearing this parable and those of us just hearing it today -most disciples want to know right now who are the good people and who are the evil ones. We want to know—even in our own hearts—what is right and good, what is wrong and evil. And the master says: there will be time enough at the harvest to be sure of the difference. It is not that easy to know. Did you ever have a weed turn out to be the most beautiful flower in your garden? I did. Things and people are not always what they appear to be. So leave the final judgment to God. Let them all grow together.

St. Matthew's own allegorical application of this parable makes it clear that he is thinking of his own fledgling church members. He identifies the wheat with the righteous and the weeds with evildoers in the church. There were faithful Jews and strange Gentiles. And, for Matthew, the master says: let them all

grow together and let's see what really happens. Things are not always as they appear! That's the lesson—for the first hearers and for us. But it's a bit counter-intuitive, not what most of us would do. It's a bit odd.

So Fr. John Donohue, S.J. suggests the only honest response to this parable for himself is: "How odd of God!" God is odd! And the parables of Jesus make that clear over and over again.

The next short story drives the point home even further. A tiny, tiny seed, like the mustard seed, can grow into a marvelous bush that provides a home for the birds. Just let it alone and let it grow—even with its weeds. Who really knows what a wonderful tree can be formed? You don't. I don't. But God does!

And finally for the Julia Child footnote in the third parable. It only takes the slightest touch of yeast to fashion the most delicious loaf you've ever eaten. Be patient and move slowly through your cooking. Trust the process itself. It's easier that way.

The moral of all three parables? Be kinder to yourself. Be careful to not disturb prematurely what you may think are weeds in your own heart. God made you just the way you are—for better AND for worse. And God can wait to see the finished product.

And the second moral? Let's be kinder to each other. And try to let the God who fashioned each one of us just the way we are, let that God be the final judge of what's really wheat and what might be weed.

Parables are strange modes of communication. They are not so much about information. They are about affirmation.

It is summer. Let's try to experience the world and our God in simpler ways. Be gentle; be kind: to yourself and to each other. Let God judge the world in God's own good time. The invitation is there in today's gospel. Let those with ears, hear. Peace!