

The Rev. Dustin D. Berg
Calvary Episcopal Church / Kaneohe, Hawaii
7th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11A: 19 July 2020
Genesis 28:10-19a / Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23 / Romans 8:12-25 / Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

Good morning... to all of you here in person, and online.

You will have heard, by now, of the death late this last week of Congressman John Lewis, of Georgia. It is safe to say that he was a legend in the public sphere – for civil rights, peace, and justice. He was present at the 1963 March on Washington, for Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, and even himself took the podium to speak, at only age 23, shortly before King spoke. He was beaten in Selma, Alabama, in the 1965 march there, along with numerous other acts of violence against him. He was a “freedom rider” working against segregation in the South in the 1960s, and he was arrested – at least 40 times, in the 1960s alone. He almost became a Baptist minister, having graduated seminary in Nashville. So I don’t think I overstate his life’s work by calling him a great one among great ones in the ongoing work toward a wholesome and just society in this country.

We’re not here, of course, to talk just about Congressman Lewis, or even his faith... though it, too, was mighty. Asked in 2016 if he regretted not sticking with ministry as his vocation, he simply replied, “I think my pulpit today is a much larger pulpit... I preach every day. Every day, I’m preaching a sermon, telling people to get off their butts and do something.” Indeed.

I think Lewis would find a great deal of resonance with the situation we find ourselves in today. We struggle with living our vocation as Christian people in this broken world and broken country. We find that sometimes the forces that would tear us apart seem to have the upper hand. And we can find that sometimes it seems easier to throw in the towel.

There is nothing new under the sun here. In fact, it is the very Gospel story Jesus tells today, from Matthew 13. Usually it’s called the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, or the Wheat and the Tares, or something along those lines. Basically, it’s a story using seeds again as a metaphor for how we, the children of the kingdom of God, are scattered about in the world. We live right alongside the evils of our own day, much like good seed finds itself right alongside the weeds that we would rather get rid of.

And Jesus, knowing the human-ness of those disciples, who wanted to get rid of the weeds of the world that were choking out the work of the children of God, Jesus shares this parable with them. Essentially, it isn’t for you to eliminate altogether the causes of evil, the presence of evil, or the work of evil, as tempting as that may seem. We want the qualities of a God-centered world, a God-centered life, and a just and peaceful world to prevail – we all do. (We wouldn’t be here, in church, if we didn’t share that basic assumption.) And so I think it’s really quite natural that in the way Jesus tells the story, the workers of the field come to the master and ask, “Ok now, should we pull up all the weeds?” And the answer: “No, because if you pluck up the weeds, you’ll end up plucking out the wheat too”.

For the longest time this seemed hard to me. Aren't weeds in a field easy enough to spot? From my own limited experience in a garden, I sure thought that was the case. Turns out, wheat and tares look so close to one another, that to the untrained eye, a person could easily mistake one for the other. It's like counterfeit money, I suppose... sometimes, it's so good of a copy it's nearly indistinguishable.

There are times when the wheat of our lives can start to look an awful lot like the tares or the weeds of the world instead. Violence masquerading as "law and order". Racism putting on the clothing of family values. Sometimes they're obvious, of course, but sometimes not so obvious – and that's one reason why leaders like John Lewis have worked tirelessly to call us back.

The answer, it seems, is that we are meant to shine ever brighter. We are meant to "out-compete" the weeds, by reflecting the light of our Savior. Much like the work of tending a garden or a field, I think, we're meant to tend, tirelessly, to our spiritual selves – to "shine like the sun" as Jesus told his disciples as he explained that parable.

How we do that depends a bit on our own gifts and abilities and context, of course, but at the heart of it lies a call to serve. Serve the other. Lift up the brokenhearted. Love the unloved. Name the forgotten. Work for justice and peace. In other words, don't even give the weeds of hatred and division, racism and fear a foothold.

That, my friends, is the kingdom of heaven. That is the house of God and the ground of our souls. To heed the call of the Savior, to reflect his light, and to work toward his kingdom. To let justice roll like waters, and righteousness like a flowing stream. Let that be your heart's desire. Amen.