

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 22, 2017)
St. Mary Roman Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

They adopted him when he was a baby. Their friends told them they were crazy – they already had several children of their own. Why would they want another child?

But they had prayed about this decision, and they sensed that God wanted them to open their home to another life. So they adopted this little boy.

At first, everything went well. The entire family embraced the little boy, and he was fitting in well. Somewhere, there is a shoebox full of fading black and white and color photos, showing this smiling little boy at his birthday parties, school events, first communion. He looked like a cherub.

But cherubs sometimes have a devilish side. By middle school, no one thought that he was an angel. He was constantly getting into trouble. Thrown out of at least two Catholic schools. Then came the drug abuse. A military boarding school. He seemed full of rage, and his parents wondered, ‘what happened to that sweet little boy?’

At times, he could be kind to them, even if the relationship was strained. Then came the Thanksgiving when he announced that he was gay, and he stormed out when not everyone was thrilled. He did call his mother on mother’s day, but he broke her heart by his anger when he asked her for money – which was often – and she told him no.

The other siblings told their parents to cut him off completely. Stop seeing him. Don’t talk to him. But moms and dads find it hard to give up. They set healthy boundaries, but the door was always open.

That’s how it went, decade after decade. Years later, mom died, and dad was on his own. Then dad started to slow down. And soon it became apparent to neighbors and friends that dad should not be alone any more.

It was a family friend who called all four of the children to express this concern. The three biological children thanked the family friend for his call, and they explained why they really did not have the time to uproot their lives to come and take care of dad. “My child is busy with travel soccer,” one explained. “We just opened a business,” said another. Caring for dad did not seem to be a priority for the children.

Except...except for the ‘troublesome’ boy who had been such a challenge. When he got the call, he and his partner flew to Virginia right away, assessed the situation, treated dad with respect. The son who had broken his parents’ hearts so often, took a leave from his job.

Slowly, he broached the subject with his dad – “do you want to come and live with me in the Midwest?” Eventually, dad said yes. And for the rest of his days, this father lived, well cared for, in the home of the boy who had been such a challenge.

In one of my last phone calls with that father, he said to me, “Parenthood is a mystery. You do your best to raise your children. But you never know exactly how they’re going to turn out. And you can never give up on them too quickly, because they might surprise you in the end.”

Parenthood *is* a mystery. You do your best to raise them. You don’t know how they will turn out. And you can’t give up on them too quickly because they might surprise you in the end.

And it’s not just true about parenting. It’s true about the person you fall in love with, or the teacher and student. The employer and employee. The friend and neighbor. We do our best for each other. But sometimes, things don’t turn out the way we planned. We may be tempted to give up on something or someone. But if we exercise some patience, we may be surprised in the end. The troublemaker may become the faithful caregiver. The apparent failure might become the actual blessing.

Perhaps this is the dynamic that Jesus is describing in his familiar parable of the weeds and the wheat. Remember, Jesus says that this dynamic is true of the *Kingdom of God*. That is, as God seeks to reveal his presence and carry out the divine plan of creating a world of justice, goodness and truth, God is indeed *very patient*.

In every human heart, and in every human situation, God provides the blessing of his presence and grace. Every one of us has been blessed by God. God has given us life, given us the chance to learn how to love. God sent Jesus to tell us the truth and show us the way and give us hope. In other words, using the image from the parable, God has prepared the soil and planted good seed. In us.

But, we don’t always turn out the way that God intends. We make selfish choices. We get distracted. We give in to anger. We fall into the temptation of creating dividing lines of “us versus them.” We stop praying. We don’t listen. Our priorities get out of whack.

God plants goodness in us... and through our carelessness, the weeds begin to grow.

But here is the key... if you were listening carefully to Jesus’ parable, you understood that this is a parable about patience... God’s patience... the divine patience.

While God does not celebrate or approve our failures, our sins, our bad behavior... God also never gives up on us... because God has been around long enough to know that we, the children of God, can change... with the help of Jesus. The child who breaks the heart of parents can turn out to be the one who cares for dad with love in his old age. And the children of God who occasionally let the weeds grow in our hearts, can always turn back to our God, our God who is patient, loving, and forgiving.

In the parable, the owner of the field refuses to give up too soon. The servants want to pull up what’s bad in the field. They want to quickly pass judgement. They think they know what’s good and what’s bad. But the owner of the field knows that a quick and simple judgment may miss the mystery... sometimes, weeds and wheat grow together in the same field. At the *end* you can tell the difference.

And in the kingdom of God, in the hearts of God's children, weeds and wheat can grow together. God is not quick to give up on us. God knows that a good harvest is possible, for all of us, if we listen to Christ and embrace his truth.

Apparent failures may, in the end, become the path to blessings.

Apparent heartbreak may, in the end, be the path to healing.

Apparent struggles may, in the end, bring the greatest gifts.

And people who have apparently 'turned out wrong' may become the sons or daughters who love the best.

If there is some failure in you, some weeds growing in the garden of your heart... have hope. God has not given up on you.

If there is someone right now in your life who has broken your heart or caused you to despair... have hope. God is not done with them yet.

And if you find yourself rushing to pass judgment on others... passing judgement on people because of who they are, where they came from, what language they speak, what their economic status is, what sins they are committing, what way of life they are living... slow down.

And remember God's patience, the patience revealed in today's parable. The patience which teaches us to look at every neighbor and say, "we are all a mix of weeds and wheat. We are all a bit of a cherub and a bit of a devil. We are all sometimes a saint and sometimes a sinner. And if God hasn't judged me too quickly, then I shouldn't rush to judge you."

We can read this parable and say to everyone we meet: "Isn't it wonderful? God isn't finished with us yet!"

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