

## Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Romans 8:26-27; and Matthew 13:24-43

Who's to say where tenderness may lead? Sometimes we can see barriers fall away and trust grow. I have seen this when I practice active listening. While it is hard to quietly listen to what another is feeling or to simply ask questions, rather than spout opinions and solutions, wisdom inevitably arises that is strong and beautiful. Yet, it can be hard to trace the impact, as the person we "loved up" walks away. Certainly, they are better able to love the next person, who in turn is kind to the next, but what if it goes nowhere?

This week's readings ask us to trust the trajectory of gentleness. I know, I know, this is counterintuitive; it contradicts the brazen forcefulness we were raised to value. We concur when the book of Wisdom declares God is the "master of might," the only god, which makes God the "source of justice." But this takes a surprising turn: "you judge with clemency and with much lenience you govern us; for power, whenever you will, attends you." Notice that the power is not opposed to the lenience but is its source. Notice too that "you show your might when the perfection of your power is disbelieved," and "you rebuke temerity." God does not let wrong slide, but, at the same time, God "permit[s] repentance."

Why does this matter? Because God has taught us "by these deeds that those who are just must be kind." If God permits repentance, shouldn't we? Our "tough on crime" prison system is broken. Maybe we can learn from Norway, where prisons are geared toward rehabilitation and recidivism rates are remarkably low. Maybe we can voice a less outraged attitude on our social media posts, since our current tone only serves to widen the rifts we have created. God challenges us to commit the same kind of time and patience to one another God gives to us.

Harumph. Upsets my typical M.O. How about you? Same deal with the first parable in this week's gospel. Matthew provides one interpretation, i.e. wait for the Final Judgement, when the wicked folk will get punished and the good will be rewarded. There are other messages as well. First, Jesus actually names a specific weed, darnel, which looks very much like wheat. Farmers must wait until the plants are large enough to tell which is which. We learn here not to say in black-and-white terms, at the start, whether someone is good or bad. What if we misjudge? We all know people who have made dramatic changes for the better. Another message lies in the weeds and wheat growing so closely that to pull up one will result in pulling up the other. When good souls experience violence, especially violence on the part of leaders who are supposed to be just, how does that harm them? What we do to one another now matters. Let the end time take care of itself. A third message worth noting for the now-time is that, while the weeds grow among the wheat, the wheat also grows among the weeds. Good is happening. What we do matters. I take great hope from this image and it sustains me when I look at institutional corruption. The Church and the Government are more than their injustices. We are the Church and the Government and we are good and we do what is just. We have all kinds of opportunities to love and be gentle and see where they lead.

We find a partner for the task in Romans 8. Deep within our souls resides the Spirit of God. When we do not know how to proceed, the Spirit will move within us, if we are open. The Spirit draws us toward God. I spoke two weeks ago about the paradox that we become freer the more we align our will to God's. Here it is again: because God's breath animates us, we are naturally drawn toward God. Leaning into God may seem to take a herculean effort – the groaning Paul describes – but we were made to be part of God's plan for the world. God is helping us, everyone of us, behind the scenes as it were, to become wheat and not weeds.

Jesus depicts this behind-the-scenes work in the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. Since we do not often find parables with a female character, let's focus there. Interestingly, this is the only mention of yeast in the New Testament that is positive and the Greek says the woman hides it in a huge amount of flour. These details point us toward a Kingdom that mysteriously upends our expectations and has tremendous results. Planting a little seed. Adding some yeast. They are the gentlest of actions. Who's to say where tenderness may lead? God knows. Will we trust and help it grow?

- ❖ When have you seen gentleness be a game-changer?
- ❖ Where do you need to try a little tenderness? Ask the Spirit to help you do so.