

16 Sunday Ordinary Time A

Sometimes it seems to me that all of us, to some extent, have been victimized by an illusion of perfection. We keep thinking that somewhere in this world, there is the perfect spot, the perfect situation, if only we could find it. Then the sharp edges would be gone from life and everything would just be lovely.

Under this illusion, we tend to become restless and impatient with the circumstances in which we find ourselves. A husband or wife become dissatisfied with an imperfect marriage and goes out in search of a perfect mate. Young people quit school because they do not find it absolutely to their liking. A man drifts about in his vocational career in quest of the perfect job; or else he is forever irritated by the imperfections of the job he has. Somewhere out there, we think, is the perfect situation.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus told a parable which addresses this concept. It was about a farmer who sowed his field with wheat. But as the crop came to maturity, weeds appeared among the wheat. His servants wanted to pull up the weeds, but the farmer said: "No, you might take the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest."

That was how Jesus saw the world – a wheat field with weeds in it. And this parable was his way of teaching us what it means to live in that kind of world.

For one thing, it means accepting and loving imperfect people. The New Testament presents two aspects of the character of Jesus which at first glance seem utterly contradictory. On the one hand it portrays him as the best man who ever lived. Simon Peter said of him: “He did no wrong; no deceit was found in his mouth.” Think of that. Peter had the opportunity to know Jesus as well as one man can know another. He observed him under every conceivable kind of stress. He had even watched him die; yet he never saw him do anything wrong nor ever heard him speak one deceitful word. That is the first aspect of his character – the best man who ever lived.

The other is that he attracted to himself people with all kinds of character flaws. The Gospel of Luke recalls a day when the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around Jesus in order to hear him. That was not an unusual occurrence. It happened often enough that his enemies nicknamed him “a friend of sinners.” They meant it to be an insult, but the rest of his life he wore it as a badge of honor.

What strange sort of goodness is this – a righteous man who had an almost irresistible appeal to people who were unrighteous and knew it? The answer is that he accepted them and loved them. They didn’t have to prove themselves or pretend to be anything they were not. He accepted them, just the way they were.

Remember that day when a group of self – righteous snobs dragged into his presence a woman who had been caught in adultery? The law

said that she should be stoned, but they wanted to know how Jesus would handle the matter. Well, he handled it but not in the way they expected. Before he finished, her would – be executioners had vanished, one by one; and she was left alone with him. Possibly for the first time in her life, she was truly befriended and treated with respect.

That's how Jesus dealt with people; that is how he deals with us. He knew that in human nature there are always weeds among the wheat; so he accepted and loved imperfect people. If you and I are going to follow him in this imperfect world, we must do the same. After all, there is no other kind of people. We are all imperfect, except for him. So if he has accepted us, surely we can accept each other.

Next, we should recognize that living in an imperfect world means playing on an imperfect team. When Jesus put together his first group of followers, we would assume that he used his best judgment and selected the best available people. But even then, there were weeds among the wheat. Of the twelve that he chose, one betrayed him, another denied him and at one point all of them abandoned him. Still this was his team, and he stayed with it. For three years, he worked side by side with those imperfect followers – coached them, if you please. And there came a day when he departed this earth and entrusted to them the final outcome of the game. John remembered and recorded a prayer of his in which he said to his Father: "I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me." History has so far demonstrated that his trust was not misplaced.

You and I are fooling ourselves if, in this world, we expect to find a perfect team of any kind. And even if we did, and joined it, it would then become imperfect, because that's what we are. There is no such thing as a perfect marriage, a perfect home, a perfect job, or a perfect church. A few may look like it from a distance, and we may secretly envy the people who are a part of them. But if you get close enough and examine them carefully enough, you will find some weeds among the wheat.

That is just the way life is in this world, and we may as well come to terms with it. Certainly, we should work for improvement. You should strive to make your marriage better than it is; but don't go floating off on a romantic cloud in search of a perfect marriage, because you are not going to find it. There is no such thing.

The same holds true of the church. Sure there are hypocrites in it. There always have been. And let's be honest enough to admit that there is a degree of hypocrisy in every one of us, including those critics who turn away from the church, still he loved it, worked with it, and gave himself for it. If he could do that, have we any right to do less.

In closing, let's consider that living in an imperfect world means settling for less than perfect results.

Last Sunday, we read a parable in which Jesus compared himself to a farmer planting a crop. Part of the seed landed on good soil and produced a harvest. But don't forget that part of them was consumed by

birds, and part of them was wasted on shallow soil, and part of them was choked by thorns. Not even Jesus got perfect results from his efforts.

Neither will us, not in anything we do. You can clean your house until it is absolutely spotless; a few days later, you will have it all to do over again. You can cultivate your flower beds until they are perfectly clean, not a weed in sight. Then take two weeks of vacation and come back. What do you think you will find? That's right – weeds. In this life, we never get through with the broom, the mop, or the hoe.

We need to remember that, lest we become discouraged in our efforts to build a better world. We work to eliminate poverty, but poverty persists. We work and pray for peace, still there are wars. We strive to establish justice, but injustice endures. It was so with Jesus. There were weeds among the wheat. Only part of his seed came to fruition, but he kept on working and took what he could get.

So here we are – imperfect men and women, living in an imperfect world. If we follow the example of Jesus, we will learn to love imperfect people; we will play on imperfect teams; and we will settle for less than perfect results. But the one thing we will not do is quit. Sure there are weeds among the wheat, but there always have been, and there always will be, until the final harvest.