**Weekend of Sunday, July 23, 2023**

**8th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 16/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 44:6-8**

**Second Reading: Romans 8:12-25**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

**Sermon Title: *“Assurance in a Confusing World”***

**Theme**

It is an age-old question: why is there evil in the world? In the parable of the wheat and the weeds Jesus suggests that both grow together until the harvest. With Paul, we long for the day that all creation will be set free from bondage and suffering. Having both weeds and wheat within us, we humbly place our hope in the promises of God, and from the Lord’s table we go forth to bear the fruit of justice and mercy.

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 44:6-8**

 6Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel,
  and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
 I am the first and I am the last;
  besides me there is no god.
 7Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,
  let them declare and set it forth before me.
 Who has announced from of old the things to come?
  Let them tell us what is yet to be.
 8Do not fear, or be afraid;
  have I not told you from of old and declared it?
  You are my witnesses!
 Is there any god besides me?
  There is no other rock; I know not one.

**Second Reading: Romans 8:12-25**

12So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—13for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

 18I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**Gospel: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**

24[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;25but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ ”
 36Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” 37He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”

**Sermon**

We are back in the weeds with Jesus again, and that reminds me of a story I heard. I’m told it’s a true story.

Pic1 Grandma was outside pulling weeds on a hot summer day when Grandpa walked up and asked her what they were having for dinner. Irritated by the thought of him sitting in the air-conditioned house while she labored away on the weeds, she snapped, "I can't believe you're asking me about supper right now! Pretend I'm out of town, go inside and make dinner yourself!" So Grandpa went back in the house and fixed himself a nice big juicy steak, potatoes, garlic bread, and a tall beer. Grandma walked in just about the time he was finishing up and asked, "Where's my dinner?" Grandpa turned and said to her, "Huh? I thought you were out of town."

PIC2 In the parable of the weeds among the wheat found in our Gospel Reading, Jesus teaches us about the coexistence of good and evil in this world. But the disciples were not picking up what he was putting down, so inside the house where the common folks wouldn’t notice they were oblivious to the meaning of that parable, they asked him to explain, and so he did.

The wheat represents the children of God, I am certain he hoped that meant his disciples and all the others who have come to believe in him. The weeds symbolize the forces of evil at work. Jesus tells us that the enemy sows the weeds, but he assures us that there will come a day of judgment when righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

I am certain that if I went around the room and asked each of you if you considered yourself a child of God, you would all say, “Yes, of course!” We wouldn’t be here in this place worshiping him if we didn’t believe he was our Lord and Savior.

And we intuitively know that the second part is true. We see good and evil coexisting in our yards and gardens in the form of grass and weeds no matter how hard we try to prevent it.

And we see it in our daily lives. Many of us are old enough to remember the days *before* we had to have virus protection on our computers. Seriously, there was a day when we did not have to worry about nefarious activity on our personal computers, but now we have an entire industry established to prevent hacking, phishing, and scamming

PIC3 Jesus used a parable about a farmer who sowed a wheat field to illustrate this. In Jesus’s day, farming was not near as efficient as our farming machinery is today. They used broadcast spreaders or simply dispersed the seed by hand on tilled soil. Modern farming is much more efficient. Today, wheat seeds are planted by machinery exactly three inches apart in rows ranging from about four to seven inches apart, depending on the variety of wheat that is grown.

But it seems like in two millennia, we have not figured out a way to eliminate weeds in wheat. Drive by any wheat field today and you will see ugly weeds growing up among the wheat. But given that the seeds are only three inches apart in rows as narrow as four to seven inches, what can the farmer do?

Back on the farm in Indiana, Mom and Dad would make my siblings and me walk the corn and soybean fields and pull the weeds, but that cannot be done in wheat fields without stepping on the wheat to get to the weeds. And then, as Jesus said, when we attempt to pull up the weed, we unintentionally pull up the wheat as well. What to do? I’m so glad you asked. Jesus has an answer.

In his parable, the farmer told his workers to let the weeds continue to grow among the wheat and it will be separated out and destroyed at the harvest.

PIC4 One summer, I worked at a commercial grain mill, and I remember watching as test samples of grain were taken from each truck. A worker has a long device called a grain sampling probe made up of two sleeves, each sleeve having slots in it. With the slots aligned, the worker climbs up on top of the vehicle holding the grain, and stabs it, allowing it to fill with the grain for sampling. Then the outer slot is rotated, capturing the sample. The worker takes it to the lab where the size, quality, and moisture content of the grain is measured, and also the amount of contamination content. That contamination is most often weeds that were harvested with the wheat, but there are also bugs, bug droppings, and spoiled grain – all of which get baked into your loaf of bread. You’re welcome! Last week I destroyed your appetite for water; this week for bread!

By the way, what do you call a weed that identifies as wheat? A *trans*plant.

In this parable, Jesus reminds us that while we live in a world of confusion, where evil seems to prevail at times, God's justice will ultimately prevail. We are called to live faithfully and allow God to separate the wheat from the weeds in His perfect timing. It is not our place to judge or uproot the evil ourselves but rather trust in God's sovereign plan for ultimate justice.

Having said that, God does allow us, and indeed, inspires us to write laws for the common good, and provides civil authorities to enforce them, and judges to oversee that justice is served. But ultimately, Jesus’s point is that God the Father will sort it all out.

And speaking of God the Father, in the First Reading from Isaiah, we witness the proclamation of God's eternal nature. The Lord declares, "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God." These words remind us that our God is not bound by time or limited by circumstances. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In a world where everything seems uncertain and fleeting, God stands as the unchanging foundation of our lives. This ought to be a comfort to us as we live out our days in a world where good and evil coexist.

The passage further emphasizes the futility of idol worship, drawing attention to the fact that idols are nothing more than the work of human hands, and I would add, minds. We are challenged to consider the idols we might have erected in our lives - the things we trust and rely on apart from God. And just to be clear, the reason idols make it into this sermon is that these things I am about to list are like weeds in our lives that may have to live with, but need to manage them in an appropriate manner. PIC5

* **Identity**
* **Job and status**
* **Money and possessions**
* **Success**
* **Physical appearance**
* **Influence**
* **Identity** - Our identity might be one the biggest idols worshiped today. Let me say again, that God declares there is only one God. We are all the creation of that one God whether we choose to believe in that one God or not. But many have abandoned who we are in Christ and placed our identity in other things. Whether it be our social media following, our position at work, our abilities/skills, or the achievements we are after, many have their identity wrapped up in the wrong thing. But when our identity is secured in God, we can live in freedom. While we will still fall short, God’s love will never fail us.
* **Job and status -** Jobs used to just be a means to an end. For most people, it was just what we did to provide for our family. Now, what we do has become who we are. I confess this is a problem for me. I have to consider retirement someday, but I wonder who I will be when I am no longer Pr. Jesse. Do you know that I get recognized all over the place? If we retire to Oklahoma to be closer to our son, Aaron, I will be a nobody there! So, I like many might be making our job or socioeconomic status our idol.
* **Money and possessions -** Western culture has bowed to money and possessions for generations. The pursuit of money and the acquisition of things is a guiding force for many. It’s an idol. Money and possessions become a problem when we place our hope and trust in money and possessions instead of God.
* **Success** – at least the way the world defines success, is an idol. God doesn’t use the concept of success; God uses the concept of faithfulness. One may be rich and famous in the world, and another may be poor and unknown in the world, and yet neither will have a place in heaven closer to the throne of God. (Those are reserved for Lutheran pastors!) Faithfulness, as defined in several parables of Jesus, is what you do with what you have.
* **Physical appearance** - You don’t have to look very far to see an advertisement that promises to fix our physical appearance to make us look better, younger, or like your favorite celebrity. I’ll confess again. I try to stay fit, well-groomed, and well-dressed because I don’t want what I look like to become the thing that distracts you from the work I do, which is proclaiming the Gospel in word and deed.
* **Influence** - With the advent of social media almost anyone has the opportunity to become famous and gain influence. All it takes is one viral video or one hot take and suddenly you can have thousands and thousands of Swifties. But among the virtues of the faithful Christian is humility, which might be the opposite of the idol of influence.

Theme Slide These idols promise temporary fulfillment, but they fail to satisfy our deepest longings. Let us turn away from such idols and recommit ourselves to the one true God who offers us eternal hope and unfailing love.

And for more on that, we turn to the Second Reading from Romans. In Romans, the Apostle Paul encourages the believers in Rome to embrace the hope of glory that comes through Christ. We are reminded that through Christ's sacrifice, we have received the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to call God our Father. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us is a testament to our identity as children of God and heirs to His promises.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Despite the sufferings we may face in this world, Paul reminds us that they are incomparable to the glory that awaits us. Creation itself groans in anticipation of the redemption and restoration that will be revealed. In times of trials and tribulations, we are called to endure with hope, for we know that God is working all things together for our good.

Our hope in Christ transcends our present circumstances, assuring us that we are not alone in our struggles. We have a divine companion who intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. Let us, therefore, fix our eyes on Jesus, the author, and perfecter of our faith, trusting that our current sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

**Prayer**

Loving, creating, and redeeming God, the world you created for us to live in is indeed beautiful and complex. Out of your great love, you give us the ability to choose to love you back. But in our humanity, we get confused about what is real and eternal by all that is fake and temporary. Send your Holy Spirit always to guide us to find our true identity as children of God and heirs to your kingdom through Christ our Lord. It is in his name that we pray. Amen