

*A sermon given on Sunday, July 17, 2011,
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Gourds & Squash, Forbearance & Slaughter

My father was an original organic gardener. Forty years ago, long before it was fashionable, his vegetable garden was covered with mulch and compost. It never looked too tidy, but it produced quite well. Among the produce was always a bountiful quantity of squash, and plenty of gourds. Over the years, some cross-pollination took place. Volunteer plants would sprout up which were a hybrid combination of squash and gourd. Dad called them “squords” – though I suppose it would have been just as logical to call them “gosh!”

The problem with these squords was that you couldn't tell by looking at them whether they were mostly squash, in which case they were okay to eat, or whether they were mostly gourd, in which case they were awful to eat! You couldn't tell until you'd gone to all the trouble of cooking them, and only then taken a bite. To my mind these squords were a great nuisance and not worth the trouble. Why spend all that time and effort watering, cultivating, picking and cooking, when it might all be wasted effort? But Dad had infinite patience with his squords. He always gave them the benefit of the doubt, never wanting to risk throwing out something that might in fact be good. And so, much to the neighbors' amusement, the Gates garden grew squords.

Such precisely is the thrust of today's Gospel reading, the Parable of the Weeds [*Mt 13:24-30,36-43*] – or sometimes, the Parable of the Wheat and Tares. God's forbearance. God's patience. God's willingness to give the benefit of the doubt. God's reluctance to risk losing something of value. The servants say to the Master, “Shall we gather up the weeds?” But he replies, “No: lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.” This made some sense to Jesus' listeners, since the poisonous ‘darnel’ weed of Palestine did in fact look much like wheat until late in the season. Jesus indicates that, in God's time, it will become clear to God who is who, and what is what. But for now: forbearance, patience, and the benefit of the doubt.

This surely comes as good news to us! It is good news because as Growing Things we are all both wheat and weed. Striving to be numbered among the righteous, still we know the truth of the familiar words from First John [*1:8*]: “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Saint Paul said it for all of us when he wrote, “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ...” [*Rom 7:18-19*] We know about such things. Resolutions broken. Opportunities missed. Harsh words spoken and regretted. Good intentions never acted upon. We know very well that the ‘wheat’ and the ‘weeds’ do grow side by side. They grow side by side in the world. They grow side by side within each one of us. And so it is comforting news indeed to hear of God's forbearance, God's patience, God's slowness to judge.

Together with comfort, however, this parable also brings a challenging reminder where it concerns how we relate to one another. For in locating ourselves in this parable, we must consider that, in addition to being the plants which grow and need patience, we might also sometimes be the servants – the servants who say eagerly to the master, “Shall we pull up those weeds?” For Jesus the issue was society's outcasts. The righteous of his day were apt to assume that the poor, the blind, the prostitutes and lepers, were nothing more than weeds. “Shall we pull

up those weeds?” said the servants. And the Master said No. By the time Matthew recorded the parable, the issue was the Christian community itself – groups holding conflicting views on dietary laws, on circumcision, on adherence to particular commandments, even on the nature of Christ himself. Followers of Jesus were flinging accusations at one another, and determined that the other should be declared unfit. “Shall we pull up those weeds?” said the servants. And the Master said No.

Here is the theme of today’s Gospel: forbearance and patience with one another, the benefit of the doubt – in our relationships; in society; in the church.

Reading the news this week I cannot help but be struck by the tragedy which ensues when such servants are not restrained, but encouraged in their eagerness to destroy others they consider to be weeds.

Just ten days ago, the Republic of South Sudan was officially declared independent after several decades of civil war in the Sudan. South Sudan was recognized by the U.S. as a sovereign nation on July 9, and admitted to the United Nations on July 14. News reports have featured joyous celebration and high-minded speeches. However, other reports surfaced on Thursday with evidence of new atrocities committed on the north-south border in recent weeks. Vast excavated sites have revealed burial grounds for mass killings. The evidence supports allegations that the Sudanese Armed Forces of the north, and northern militias, have engaged in a campaign of killing civilians, including Sudanese Christians.

One newly discovered mass grave is adjacent to the Kadugli compound of the Episcopal Church of Sudan, in South Kordofan. Victims almost certainly include Episcopalians from that compound. Here is displayed tragically and graphically the ultimate end, when one set of human beings is allowed to think of another group as little more than weeds to be destroyed. This execution or literal slaughter by machete is a manifestation of that very question, “Shall we pull up those weeds?”, when tragically the reply is, “Yes, destroy them.” The imagery of a passage like today’s gospel, which speaks of collecting weeds and binding them up in bundles to be burned, is acted out literally, perversely, and in complete contravention of the passage’s actual message which clearly says that such judgment and destruction is the prerogative of God, only God, and only at the end of the age.

The thing to be weeded out is the intolerance itself, and the persecution and genocide which are its ultimate expression. Episcopal Church leaders who have brought reports of the Sudanese atrocities to our U.S. Senate this week, are to be commended – as are U.S. diplomats doing the same at the United Nations. An organization called American Friends of the Episcopal Church of Sudan is doing good work. (www.afrecs.org) On reading the news this week I was moved to make a contribution to that organization on behalf of the parish. Perhaps you would like to add your own support.

Forbearance and patience with one another, extending the benefit of the doubt – in our relationships; in society; in the church. Intolerance only of intolerance itself.

Most of us are not, by God’s grace, either victims or perpetrators of such genocidal intolerance as that in South Kordofan. Nonetheless – if you will forgive this – we are all “squards” in God’s garden. Mixtures of the worthy and the not-so-worthy. As such, let us be humble. Humble towards God, giving thanks that God judges us with unwarranted patience. And humble towards one another, reflecting God’s forbearance with our own patience and slowness to judge.

“Shall we pull up those weeds?” said the servants. And the Master said, No.