

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
1Kgs 3:5, 7-12
Ps 119 *passim*
Rom 8:28-30
Mt 13:44-52

Deacon Bob Cassey
St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
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Today is the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time. We're in Year A of the 3-year lectionary cycle, which focuses on the Gospel of Matthew. St. Matthew, you'll remember, was a tax collector when Jesus called him. Way back in the 8th century, an English monk we know as Saint Bede said of Matthew in a homily, "Jesus saw the tax collector and, because he saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him, he said to him, 'Follow me.'" Those words that are translated as "he saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him," in St. Bede's original Latin, were "*Miserando atque eligendo*."

When Pope Francis was first ordained a bishop, he chose "*Miserando atque eligendo*" as his episcopal motto. He kept it when he was elected pope. "By looking with mercy and choosing." Mercy is the central focus of his pontificate. He declared 2016 to be a Jubilee Year of Mercy. In his speeches, homilies, and writings, the theme of mercy shows up again and again. And frequently Pope Francis contrasts mercy – mercy the attribute of God and mercy the virtue we are called to develop in ourselves – with judgment.

In his first press conference, on the plane coming back from his visit to the refugee camp on the Italian island of Lampedusa, Pope Francis shocked the world – well, he shocked me at least – when he uttered those famous words, "Who am I to judge?" I thought, "You're the pope! If the pope isn't one to judge, then who is?" Precisely!

The Gospel readings for the last three Sundays have been from the 13th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Two weeks ago Matthew set the stage: Jesus taught the people with parables. Parables are stories that have a point, and frequently the point is very sharp, stirring us to new and unexpected insights. Two weeks ago we got the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soil, which left us with zingers like, "What kind of soil am I? What do I do with the Word of God in my life?" Last week we got the parable of the wheat and the weeds. The master wanted wheat and sowed good seed, but his enemy snuck in under cover of darkness and sowed weeds. The master decided to let both the wheat and the weeds grow to maturity, and then to sort out the one from the other only at harvest time. Today we hear a similar parable. The dragnet sweeps up everything that falls within its webbing, both the good and the bad, and then only when the catch is brought on shore do the fishers separate the good fish, the edible and marketable fish, from the bad stuff.

Notice in both parables who does the sorting out, who decides who's been naughty and who's been nice. It's not the so-called good folks, not the priests, not the scribes, not the elders. It's not even the disciples or the apostles. No, in both cases, Jesus says that he will be the final judge of who is wicked and who is righteous, that his judgment will be passed "at the end of the age," and the culling between bad and good will be done by the angels and not by any human being.

"Who am I to judge?" History is full of instances where human beings committed terrible acts, thinking they were good, and sometimes did them in the name of God. And we have to wonder, when future generations look back on us here and now, what will they say? How often will they say, "They used to do *what?!*"

Besides, we don't do a very good job of judging people as good or bad. We look for white hats and black hats, but all we see are grey hats.

The great 20th century Russian author, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, observed in his great masterwork, *The Gulag Archipelago*, that separating good from evil is a dangerous and sometimes treacherous endeavor. He wrote:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Maybe this is why the master tells the workers not to root out the weeds until harvest time: maybe the truth is that it takes a lifetime to become one or the other, to be genuinely good or truly bad. In the meantime, we are called to be humble, to be merciful, and to suspend judgment. God in his infinite mercy and his infinite justice will pass the final judgment. And God will leave it up to the angels to conduct the final round-up, when the good will face their just reward and evildoers their punishment.

Of course we are called to stand up to injustice and wrongdoing. But one of the lessons the mercy of God teaches us is that both our knowledge and our understanding are imperfect. Like young King Solomon, we pray for wisdom, for the grace to do the right thing even with less than perfect knowledge and understanding.

Miserando atque eligendo. See through the eyes of mercy and choose.