



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

25th Sunday in Trinity - November 13th, 2016

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.**

The passage selected for the sermon today is taken from the Gospel:

“The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.”

You will notice that some of our parishioners are wearing red paper poppies today. Those poppies are a tradition that started shortly after World War I. Moina Michael, a woman college professor in Georgia, working with the international YWCA, was inspired by the poem, “In Flanders Field”, by Col. John McRae. In the poem, the dead of the War speak through their graves, which are covered with red poppies, symbolic of both the hope that springs from their sacrifice and the precious gift of the ultimate sacrifice they made with their blood in the name of freedom.

A French woman, Madame Guerin, made the remembrance international, and today, in every English speaking country, the tradition of making an offering for the surviving soldiers, and for the families of those who were killed, in exchange for the privilege of wearing a red paper poppy continues. In America, the VFW and American Legion sponsor the poppies. In Britain, the Royal British Legion does the same. Of course, the poppies are worn not only for the memory of the brave soldiers that died in the Great War, but also in memory of all the men and women who have perished in the

sadly, too many wars, that have been fought for our freedom since the “war to end all wars”.

If we think objectively about the lives of those soldiers, we realize that they were not perfect. They were men like any other men of their time, and our time. Certainly, like soldiers of all times, they were occasions when they were coarse and unkind. Undoubtedly, at times they had failed their loved ones at home, as we fail our loved ones still today, by selfishness, hurtfulness and pride. As much as they were heroic in their death, they were sinners like us in their lives. And yet, we don't remember their failings. In the blood of the sacrifice that they made, those failings, some of them grievous, are washed away, and they live on in our memory for the saintliness of their courage, faithfulness and sacrifice.

It is helpful to have in mind that understanding of the power of sacrifice to overcome sinfulness as we consider the Gospel this morning. In this parable, a man who has planted his garden with good seed, is undermined as an enemy sows weeds in the field with his wheat. Of course, the farmer is God, and the field is His Creation. It is Adam and Eve and you and I that are the intended harvest, sown with good intent. The enemy is clearly the devil, who has snuck into the Garden and compromised the harvest by sowing the tares.

It is the nature of the tares, the weeds that compromise the harvest, which is often the subject of misinterpretation. The easy interpretation is that the weeds are bad people. Those people who hate us for our faith, radical Islamic terrorists or the sinister atheists that attack the Godly foundation of our Constitution and country. On that slippery slope of interpretation, our

personal enemies take their place with the tares as well. The antagonist at work, the beloved who disappoints and betrays, the sibling that gets the attention we crave, or even the parent who could not remain perched atop the pedestal we placed them. It doesn't take very long until the whole world is populated by the sons of demons sent here confound our saintliness, and since these opponents are ungodly, inhuman, creatures of Satan rather than God, we can be self justified in hating them and behaving badly in our relations to them. Surely we can be excused from loving these creatures as we love ourselves.

Ah, but as our good friend William Shakespeare might say, therein lies the rub. These antagonists in our lives, whether on the great political and religious stages, or the cozy confines of our workplaces and homes, are not demons. They are wheat, just as we are wheat. Persons made in the image of God, the neighbors we are commanded to love.

Only God has the power to create. To allow us the gift of free will, God has allowed the devil the power to tempt us to corruption and perversion. In fact, it is a corrupted understanding that allows us to imagine ourselves as the wheat, and those who disappoint or hurt as us the tares. The proper understanding is that we are the field. In us God has planted the image of Himself, souls that can love and be loved, forgive and ask forgiveness.

The tares are the inclinations to pride and self-centeredness, to lying, to greed, to envy, to self-justification. Those temptations are the weeds that spring up in our lives, which are the handiwork of the enemy. Of course, these tendencies are in our neighbors as well. To love them as God demands that we do, means we not only have to overcome the hurtfulness we absorb from them, but the inclination in ourselves to justify returning the same to them.

Thankfully, the parable doesn't end with the revelation that we have met the enemy, and he is us. It continues to tell us about the Nature of God. Had it been our Garden, we would have been quick to dig it all up and re-plant. When the weeds popped up, it was not too late to start over. But God allowed us to persist. He also did not, as the servant had suggested, rip out the tares, because he did not want to destroy the good seed. That would mean taking away our temptation by force, to preempt our free will. If we had no ability to deny His

love for us, and His command to love each other, then we would not know love at all. Obedience compelled is not love. Only obedience by choice accompanied by sacrifice and humility is love.

Instead, God allows us to mature, even though we are surrounded by the temptations of life, He nourishes us, and feeds us with His own life, so that we will come to bear the fruit that was intended. At the time of the Harvest, He will gather up what has been corrupt and perverse in our lives, the temptations that beset us and turn us from Him, and he will bind them up and burn them. They will not abide in His presence and in the place that He has set aside for us.

A few weeks ago, I talked about my grandmother, making peace as she was dying, forgiving and asking forgiveness before she would go to meet her Lord and Savior. That is the binding up and burning of temptation and sin, clearing the field of everything that is not Godly before we are gathered in to the place prepared for us.

The red poppies reflect that same process of purification. The failings and sinfulness of those who gave their life in war, is washed away by the sacrifice that they made, leaving our appreciation and reverence. So it is with all grieving, which is the recognition that our tears and sadness give way through a transformation of remembrance, so that kindness, humor and love are the only memories that persist. Our disappointments and hurts give way to the faith of knowing are beloved are with us still, and we will be with them.

In understanding that process, we have faith that our own sinfulness and failings will be done away as well, not by our sacrifice, but by the sacrifice that was made for us by Jesus. By grace, He takes away our sin, fortifies our virtue, which is the wheat in our garden. By the gift of His Body and Blood, He purges from us what cannot be in His presence, so that we can come in peace to the place He has prepared for us.

And we don't have to wait as long to start bundling and burning as my grandmother did. We can follow the advice of St. Paul in the Epistle for this day, having hearts of compassion, kindness and humility, and forgiving one another, which is the bond of perfection and the peace of God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen