

**Sermon, Year A, Proper 11**

**The Rt. Rev. Gregory H. Rickel**

**St. Augustine's, Freeland**

**July 20, 2014**

**In September 1957, in the wake of the Supreme Court decision that outlawed racially segregated schools, the governor of Arkansas, the state I call home, posted the National Guard at the front door of Little Rock Central High School. Despite the local school board's agreement to integrate classes, he was determined to prevent black students from entering the building on the first day of school.**

**Fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford was the first of a group that came to be known as the Little Rock Nine. She was met by a mob of white segregationists, many of them students, who screamed, spat and threatened her.**

**News cameras and photographers were all over that day, but there is one picture in particular that came to represent that incident to the**

world: that of Eckford with her back to an advancing crowd, with one young white woman screaming at her — another teenager named Hazel Bryan. In later weeks, President Dwight Eisenhower sent federal troops to escort the children to school, but it was tense for a long time.

These two women would be, through this picture, bound to each other for the rest of their lives. The man that took that picture was named Will Counts. Fast forward 40 years, to the 1997 anniversary of the events in Little Rock. Elizabeth Eckford was there and so was Hazel Bryan, now Hazel Massery. It turns out Will Counts, the photographer was back too, and with 40 years behind them, he found the two women, and asked if he could take their picture together, a new one. The writer of a book on this event and these two women wrote:

"Something extraordinary happened," Margolick recalls. "Not only did he take a picture of the two of them smiling in front of Central High School — from which they later made a poster labeled 'Reconciliation'

— but later, when the cameras were turned off, Elizabeth and Hazel came to know one another."

It wasn't easy, of course, but after "kind of an awkward start," the two spent quite a lot of time together. They traveled, spoke to school kids. Not just about the infamy of that day in 1957, but about their respective backgrounds, about who they were then and who they'd come to be since.

This parable of the weeds and wheat is really one that can become quite troubling for us. I have to say I have not always enjoyed what a preacher will do with it. It seems to put forth a great dualism,

Far too often, dualisms have supported the dominant powers and the status quo. The fire-and-brimstone sermons that some of us remember were, and still are, preached against slaves, immigrants, homosexuals, working people, women, the youth, and many others who are not part of the establishment. Rarely in the history of mainline Christianity were these sermons directed against the wealthy

and the powerful, or even more the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Dualisms of judgment are easily misused.

The same is true for the dualism of nature and grace. Those who considered themselves in the state of grace often claimed not only moral superiority but also political dominance over those who were deemed to be in the state of nature. The church and the popes of the Middle Ages may serve as an example, but the conquest of Latin America by the Spanish and the Portuguese and the later colonialisms of the Northern European countries are just as troublesome.<sup>2</sup> Dualisms of nature and grace are still being misused today, for instance, when North Americans cling to their dream of US exceptionalism. Reiger, Lectionary Homiletics, July 2014

Weeds and wheat. As with all parables I would urge you to read it all, and to read it carefully. We know now, and you may well have heard over the years, that the weed was called Darnel, and it was virtually impossible to tell if it was even in the field, it looks just like wheat, and really could not be detected until the harvest.

**So the right practice, which the people of the time would have known, was to leave it alone, to simply let it grow along side, until harvest time, when the farmer, the master, in our case, our maker, would get to judge, to segregate, to decide. That is an important point, maybe the most important point here.**

**Even though the parable is clear, that there is the bad weed, and the good wheat, it is just as clear that it is not ours to decide, just to know, to realize, to live with.**

**A lot of people who hail from our Christian tribe seem not to get that. I hope those of you reaffirming your faith today, are reaffirming a faith that realizes that we can leave that part to God.**

**In that world in 1957, in the south of this country and all over it, Elizabeth Eckford was considered weed, and Hazel Bryan, wheat. With time, and learning, that was completely changed, reversed, in them, but even more by those of us who watched, and took sides too.**

**In these last days, as people blocked the buses of Central American children, who had just made a harrowing journey of thousands of**

miles, by jeering, and shouting their unwelcome. I thought to myself, here is the Central High picture of our generation. I thought about us, humans, and for all of our abilities in compassion and care, just how cruel and demeaning we can be to each other. It makes no matter how one feels about the immigration policy of this country, or the lack thereof, the reality is that these are fellow human beings, most of them children.

I thought this even more, when watching the story in Murrieta, CA a young woman, about the age Hazel Bryan was in 1957, seething with anger, shouting into the camera that THEY (the weeds in her mind) should go somewhere else. She went on to spout that amazing rational, the facade we dare use to back up our own selfish need to hate, I am a Christian, but this is wrong, we don't want THEM here.

Them, some of them, the same age as her, but from a different world, and a different color. 50 years from now, I wondered, would she be proud of that moment, would she be changed? How do we view it now? How will we view it then?

**. I think we need to take the dualism out of this as much as possible and realize that Jesus, I do believe, was speaking of the soil, the land within each of us, in each of us the potential and the reality of weed and wheat. Both are in us, living right beside one another. Weed and wheat are within each of us. We are a walking field, that needs tending and discernment. We do not stand apart, wholly one or the other.**

**It would be good if the story of Eckford and Hazel Bryan ended with reconciliation and a long and lasting friendship. But alas, it does not. Mostly believe, because of all of the scrutiny, the expectations on them for their relationship, the probing, they eventually became estranged once again.**

**By 2007, 50 years after the day of the photograph, the friendship seemed to have soured.**

**And so the happy ending came to something of an end.**

**It is just difficult for us, as humans, not to segregate, parcel out, categorize, use our dualisms, weed or wheat.**

**But the amazing thing about all of these stories, of all these people, the ones you might try to classify as weed or wheat, or like the most, or the least, is that at no point, or at any point, were any of them outside God's grace.**

**Not Hazel Bryan when she spat and derided Elizabeth Eckford simply for being black, not Elizabeth Eckford, in her seeming inability to finally forgive, not that young woman in Murrieta CA wanting to make sure her neighborhood was untouched by those she wished to avoid. None of them, in all cases, we have a God that waits for us to come to our senses, and is there even if we don't, that loves us even in our uncooperative dualisms, inside us and out.**

**The same contradictions reside in us all. We live with that in fear and trembling, or we should, and with a deep thankfulness for a God that loves us anyway.**

**A God that loves us so much, he left us out of the judgement, the segregation of weed or wheat. Leave that to me God says.**

**That is our God, A God that is beyond all our boundaries, all our delineation's, all our metaphors, a God mired in the weeds and the wheat,**

**As Isaiah says so well, there is no other rock, I know not one. AMEN for that.**

