

## A 7.23.2023 Pentecost 8 | Sermon

After the crowds had left and he'd gone into the house, the disciples approached Jesus, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." They sound worried to me. "Are we the weeds?" they seem to be asking. I think about Matthew who'd left a lucrative position as a tax collector - a traitor to his people, a supporter of the occupying power of Rome. I think about Peter and James and Andrew, fishermen when Jesus called them. Who knows what they carried in their pasts or futures. If they were worried by this parable, I think they would have found some relief in Jesus' explanation of "who's who". "The good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one..."

It is a comfort to see a clear line in the sand, to see the teams in black and white. It's a comfort to consider the world in terms of the good and the bad because if we are any good at all, we know which side we're on, and the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Thanks be2G

But Jesus knows, and we know, that the world is a little more complicated. We can't really blame the disciples if they took Jesus' explanation the way it sounds, because it paints a very optimistic picture: If you're a relatively good person you don't have to worry about that fiery furnace with the gnashing of teeth and the weeping. And yet, Jesus knows and we know that we live in a world where wheat and weeds grow together. So I don't believe he's speaking of the wheat and weeds as people - I think he's talking about the wheat and weeds in people. For both wheat and weeds live inside each of us.

That can be a tough truth to swallow, and we have a long history of denying that it's true - that as virtuous and kind and generous as we can be, there are malignant forces at work in us too. A look at that long history proves the point. but lifting up a more recent piece of that history deepens the view.

In October of 2017 #MeToo exploded on social media. It was a line in the sand, and soon became a movement of mostly women toward ending sexual violence and sexual assault - the result of cultural "weeds" left to their own devices. "MeToo" was the anthem of survivors who spoke out about their experiences and connected with each other in solidarity and for the sake of seeking collective justice. The power gathered as their stories connected beyond the confines of "isolated incidents" and "bad apples", quickly began identifying the male perpetrators: Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and a host of others were convicted and sent to prison for their crimes. Eventually the list of weeds included people like Al Franken (a MN State Senator) and Garrison Kealer, both of whom were stripped of their platform and power in the public rush to denounce them as weeds among the wheat.

I supported the WeToo movement and continue to see its value for what it was and is. But in that rush (that I too participated in) something started to feel uncomfortable. Horrible things had been done and many perpetrators were identified and punished to the full extent of the law. But as allegations surfaced and stories were corroborated and echoed, the rush of society to condemn the accused felt so abrupt and so decisive and complete that it gave me pause. The accused were "disowned" so immediately and with such force that it began to feel like something else was going on.

Long story short, our “rush to condemn” was our reaction to what we saw in ourselves. To put it another way, the “rush to condemn” was less about the crime than about our devotion to our own innocence. We were rightly horrified to learn that many perpetrators of sexual violence operated with impunity for years before the stories of their victims surfaced. So we violently and impartially cut them off and hid them away in order to deny the weeds within ourselves. The real casualty then became the real opportunity MeToo presented. In the face of the breadth of these behaviors and the numbers of victims across the country, we could have asked ourselves, “Where then did these weeds come from?” We could have plumbed our personal and social depths for where such abuse grows from. Answering the question honestly we might not have so quickly pointed the finger and defended the illusion of our innocence - we might have paused and looked for the weeds inside us.

Looking at MeToo this way opens up a new vista in what we choose to be conscious of. Unfortunately, the view seems pretty hopeless. The weeds in us grow alongside the wheat and Jesus is right, they can’t be ripped out without uprooting the good stuff along with it. What hope is there for us (or for the world) if the weeds within are as deeply rooted as they are? Even the farmer sounds resigned when he says, “Let both of them grow together...” But he doesn’t stop there - “...until the harvest.”

Those last three words point to Christian hope - hope for a distant fulfillment that will see the weeds sorted from the wheat. (Is this hopeful longing what we murmur when we speak the mystery of faith, that “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”?)

It is the spirit of adoption Paul speaks of that loosens the bonds of slavery to fear - the fear that lingers ever ready to receive us again. That we belong to the ultimate sorter by God's own claim on us is hopeful. But it's a precarious hope in something unseen. We know and hear and groan along in the longing of all creation, waiting for that something that sometimes feels more brittle than sure. But hope we do.

"...hope that is seen is not hope," Paul tells us. "For who hopes for what is seen?"

Jurgen Moltman wrote a whole book called *The Theology of Hope* in which he compares hope and optimism. "...hope, unlike optimism" he writes, "is independent of people's circumstances..." Continuing, "Optimism is based on the possibility of things ' as they have come to be; hope is based on the possibilities of God ' irrespective of how things are." And finally (and this is key), this means that "Hope can spring up even in the valley of the shadow of death; indeed, it is there that it becomes truly manifest."

Redemption is the word for that which we wait for, for which we long and hope - a final redemption of all the pain, terror, fear, abuse, and horror we are capable of creating and committing. It's a transformation of the world in which the good wheat within us feeds the world, the weeds dissolve away, and creation is again made whole. "The field is almost ready for the harvest but it's far from perfect (Guenther)." Nevertheless (*there's a Christian word*). Nevertheless we hope beyond what we see, and long for the flourishing that God in Christ will come again to harvest.

AMEN