

Weed Problems

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, (July 19) 2020

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Our unwillingness to use violence to make the world “better” means that we must often learn to wait.

- Stanley Hauerwas

When I was growing up, I was often with one grandfather or the other. Both of my grandfathers grew up on farms, so if we were driving outside of town, they often commented on the nature of the crops and fields we passed. If we came up on a crop of wheat or milo or cotton and its rows were neat and clean, my grandfathers would nod in satisfaction. But if we came up on some farmer's crop that was infested in weeds and Johnson grass, they could be withering in their criticism. Their criticism of that farmer's weed-infested fields became a criticism of that farmer's weed-infested character. So, I learned early on to watch out for the weeds!

I still have a tendency to worry over the weeds. Weeds are a problem! What are we going to do about the weeds?!

Jesus tells us what to do about the weeds in today's Scripture lesson from Matthew. Matthew's chapter 13 is full of Jesus' agrarian parables: the sower and the seed, the mustard seed, and in today's lesson the parable of the wheat and the weeds or as it is sometimes known the parable of the wheat and the tares.

A farmer went out to sow good wheat seed in his fields. But somehow, during the night, someone came along and sowed weeds among his wheat. As the young plants grew and began to head-out, the farmhands noticed they had a pretty good crop of weeds growing along with the crop of wheat. So, they came in a little indignant, “Boss, what’s wrong with you? You’ve got weeds in your field. You must be getting lazy in your old age! Are you ready for us to go out and take care of them?! Give us a few days and we’ll have this farm looking good and neat again.”

The farmer said, “No, boys, I tell you what, we’d better be careful. The particular weed infestation we have is *darnel*, also known as “false wheat” because it not only looks like wheat, it grows right up alongside the wheat plant and intertwines its root system with the root system of the wheat, so when you pull up the darnel, you also pull up the wheat. So, we are going to have to wait until harvest. The wheat will head-out, but the darnel does not grow a head that is full of grain. Let it all grow up together and then at harvest we’ll reap all of it and separate it out.”

The farmhands went out, once again mindful that it was a good thing that he was the farmer and they were the hands.

As in any of the parables of Jesus it is good to ask yourself where you stand in the parable. Are we the wheat in this parable or are we the weeds? The answer is we’re both – sometimes we’re the wheat but sometimes we’re the weeds. Are we the workers? Yes. Are we the farmer? No. However we see this parable, we’re

not the farmer. There is only one farmer, and it is not us. It is God. Or as Jesus says, it is the Son of Man, the Truly Human One. The Messiah.

So, where do we stand in this parable?

In an old Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown is confronted by frustrated Lucy who says, “Charlie Brown, you are the crabgrass in the lawn of life.” Charlie Brown, in Lucy’s angry eyes, is a hindrance to what she thinks life should be. And even though we tend to sympathize with Charlie Brown, we know that Lucy has a point.

My heavens, what we could do if we didn’t have the weeds! What we could do if there was not so much sin and evil in this world. So much sorry-ness, complacency, laziness, and going-along-to-get-along. What if we had more people, had more churches with the gumption to not only know justice and peace, but who do something about it?! Weeds!

Or what could be accomplished if everyone worked together feeding the hungry or doing after-school programs for at-risk children? For that matter, what would happen if everyone in our town cared and worked for better public schools, better teacher pay, and for the welfare of all of our children? But no, we have weeds!

Or closer to home, remember the old adage that 80% of a church’s work is done by 20% of the people and that 80% of the church’s budget is supported by 20% of the people. What would happen if everyone pitched-in together and did

100% of the work and 100% of the finances? Wouldn't that be great?! But no, we have weeds!

No matter how open-minded we think we are. No matter how accommodating we are or how accepting of others, we all have our weeds we want to pull up. Now some weeds are big and stubborn and dangerous – racism, bigotry, greed, and just plain old meanness. While others are perhaps just irritating. For some of us, the weeds we were taught to hate were drinking, dancing, and smoking. For others of us, we are repulsed by the systemic weeds of poverty, hunger, homelessness, corruption, and narcissism in high places. These days, besides racism and white nationalism, we're dealing with climate change and its related pandemic outbreaks. We see the weeds of chronic war and violence, and we wonder what they are doing to us as a people. On and on we could go. And then there are many of us who see different weeds. The weeds we detest have specific names and faces; they are spouses, or parents, or children, or neighbors, or co-workers, or supervisors, and on and on. Nevertheless, weeds of some sort threaten to choke out the good wheat and we not only want to get rid of the weeds, we feel justified in doing so! Sometimes we get so frustrated over the weeds that we want to get some Round-Up and just spray everything!

What are we going to do with those weeds?!

Am I talking to you, yet?

In the classic Greek tragedy, *Medea*, Medea kills both of her sons in revenge against her unfaithful, sorry husband. When he asks how she could have done such

a thing, she replies, “Because I hated you more than I loved them.”

The great preacher and hero of mine, William Sloane Coffin said that we need to be clear, “if you love good you have to hate evil; otherwise you are sentimental. But if you hate evil more than you love good, you simply become a damn good hater, and of such people the world has enough” (from *The Courage to Love*, p. 89).

To use the language of the parable, we need to remember that the purpose the farm exists in the first place is so wheat will be raised. The purpose of the farm is not so we can kill weeds.

I’ve been told that Lenin said it is better to execute a hundred innocent persons than to have one guilty person go free. We can become so twisted in our zeal for purity and for rightness that our focus becomes eradicating evil more than encouraging good. We become obsessed in rooting out the weeds. And these days there is a lot zeal for purity. We tend to want 100% with us or 100% against us, and if you’re only 75% one way or another, we write you off as 100% against us. We don’t like a farm that has some weeds mixed in with the wheat. We want it pure!

How different is the Way of the God we know in Jesus Christ. The great prophet Isaiah said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Is. 55: 9-10).

In God's kingdom, nothing is counted as expendable. A shepherd has 100 sheep, but one is missing, and he moves heaven and earth searching for it until it is found and returned safely to the fold. A woman has one lost coin and searches until she finds it and a father waits for his lost son. God is more interested in salvation than punishment and cares more for redemption than correction.

This parable cautions us about getting the priorities of God mixed up so that we end up caring more for correction than we do for redemption.

The art of being a follower of Jesus is the art of living on this farm in this parable. We are to live knowing our place in God's good plan. Know our limits. It is not up to us to make the wheat grow. It is not up to us purify the field. Indeed, it is not even in our power to make the field pure. And in this parable, it is beyond us to even know for sure which plants are wheat and which are weeds. Our job is to serve the master farmer in the way the master farmer wants us to. What Wendell Berry calls a proper humility.

This parable does not deny the presence of evil. And it does not deny that evil threatens to choke out the good. But this parable affirms that our hope is in God. There will be a day of reckoning and the good news is that it is in God's hands. God is in charge.

We farmhands are to trust God. Therefore, we can be patient people. Patience is not an American virtue these days. We do not know how to wait. In our lack of patience, we want COVID-19 to end immediately, schools to reopen, business as usual, and life to return to "normal." And we want it now!

Patience is what Milton called “the better fortitude” because it takes great courage to be patient. Patience is rooted in hope and hope is rooted in God. Patience says that we are trusting God over the long-haul. We take the long view and allow the wheat and weeds to grow so that we are often surprised when some plants we thought sure were weeds turn out to be wheat after all.

This is why I’m reluctant to label and write-off anyone as “evil.” Again, a kind of judgment rooted in my zeal for purity. Each and every one of us is full of weeds and wheat, all mixed up and growing together. And that includes people in our past. This does not mean we don’t call a weed what it is. We need to name it and speak out about the weeds. But we seek to be careful. We look around us – we look inside of us – and know that God is still at work, redeeming weeds and growing good wheat.

Shane Claiborne, who lives in intentional Christian community in the heart of Philadelphia, says of this parable, this is how Jesus “rids the world of evil.” Jesus tells us to be careful and be patient. In our zeal to clean up the farm, we end up destroying more than we thought we would. When we’re consumed with pulling up the weeds, we end up destroying everything. Jesus urges patience and humility and trust in God and God’s ways.

As I said, someday there will be a reckoning, but it is not up to us.

This parable does not deny that there is work to be done. We disciples of Jesus Christ have plenty to do embodying and practicing the Way of Jesus. But part of that Way is to be a patient and hopeful people. That’s why we believe in

Sabbath. We work hard and well but we know that all that we have is a gift of God so we can rest on the Sabbath. As Berry says in one of his poems, “we live by mercy, if we live.” One way to gauge yourself about how well you are doing with the Sabbath and whether or not you are able to rest in God’s hands each night is to ask yourself, are you able to sleep at night? Are you able to rest? Are you able to patiently hope in God and rest at night after a day of good work? Or do you lie awake worrying over the weeds?

Next month will be the thirty-second anniversary of me becoming the pastor of this congregation. One of the reasons Jane and I have remained here for our ministry, is because in this small, lively congregation I have continued to learn that it is not up to me to pull up all of the weeds. We don’t have that kind of power. Here, we are learning our proper humility. Our calling to is to do the work God calls us to, and trust God for the rest. Work well, give thanks, love God and love neighbor. Work hard but rest at the end of the day because it is in God’s hands.

Last week, Steve Chism and I joked about our tendency to always be looking over the shoulder of Almighty God, offering advice, giving our counsel, trying to show God how to do it. And I admit, there are those days when I come into my study for a serious conference with the Lord God Almighty. We have some talking to do. I’m aggravated and fed up.

So, the Almighty and I pour some coffee and sit down. I fume and fuss and God listens and stirs her coffee. I say to God, “You know, if you would listen to me, we could make some serious improvements! If you would let me do this, we could put a stop to this white nationalism and racism in America. Furthermore, let

me tell you how to stop this chronic war we're in and how it is making all of us more violent, where everyone wants to pack a pistol and pull it if someone asks why they're not wearing a mask. I'm tired of politicians who care more for Big Money than they do little people and while we're talking, I also have some ideas about climate change, COVID-19 and the lack of leadership in this country. And I'll tell you something else, I spend way too much time with people on the same old stuff, day after day and time after time. It is as if they never learn. At the same time, I'm ready to put my foot down with people who are always criticizing but never volunteering to do anything. One more thing: I'm ready to do something about people who still think the earth is flat and the high point of American history was before the Civil War, because they don't read, don't think, and don't trust anything beyond Facebook." On and on I go, fretting and fussing and fuming!

Finally, after I'm finished, the Almighty stirs her coffee and says, "There's just one thing.... It's my farm."

And so it is.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.