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Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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*The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost Proper 11A – July 19, 2020
Isaiah 44:6-8, Psalm 86:11-17, Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

Grace to you and peace, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Have you been out in your garden much this spring and summer? Of course, that's a safe pastime, even in the time of coronavirus. If you are a gardener, you certainly know that there's likely a volunteer weed growing in the bed that looks a lot like the plant you've intentionally embedded in the soil, by seed or transplant, whether this year for the first time, or many years ago.

This fact of nature is part of God's "good" creation. I don't know what God's purpose is in creating this state of affairs, with what we consider to be weeds that look like plants, but that take the plants' nutrients and maybe overpower them. Maybe God doesn't consider anything to be a weed. But I'm not going to second guess God. So, it's just a fact. And it's a fact that has a bearing on the parable we've heard from Jesus again this morning.

The sower has sown good seed in his field for a healthy wheat harvest. But in the dark of night an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. "So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well" (13:24-26).

Matthew uses the Greek term *zizania* when he describes the weed. Today we'd call that botanical sample a kind of wild rice grass. "What Matthew most likely refers to, however, is darnel or cockle, a noxious weed that closely resembles wheat and is plentiful in Israel. The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident only when the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight." Johnson, Elizabeth, "Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43," <https://www.workingpreacher.org>, 2011.

The workers who noticed that there were weeds growing among the wheat wanted to pull the weeds to create a pure field of wheat to grow to maturity. But the landowner – the original sower – told them not to do that. He was afraid that they would uproot the wheat along with the weeds. Maybe because at that point, the

wheat and weeds were not distinguishable because the heads of grain hadn't grown to the point that they could readily be recognized in every case. Maybe because the roots were already intertwined, and if the wheat were pulled up by mistake, the plants couldn't be restored to the soil to keep growing to maturity.

So, the landowner told the workers just to let the weeds and wheat grow together until the wheat was ready for harvest, and then the reapers would pull out the weeds first and burn them before harvesting the wheat. Just wait. Just wait, says Jesus.

That's good advice for the workers in the field. It's also good advice for all of us in many cases when we're moving forward on a path of moral certainty to distinguish friends from enemies; good actors vs. those who harm. When we do that, without taking our time, without gathering all the information we need to reach considered conclusions, we run the risk of jumping to conclusions – unfounded conclusions. When we make judgments about people, we can, instead, be judgmental.

Jesus warns us about doing this in his explanation of the parable. He tells us that “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.” (Matthew 13:37-40.)

This is telling in our contemporary world. During the past several weeks, while there have been righteous demonstrations calling for an end to police violence against Black and Brown people, I have heard the voices of a number of Black police officers, being asked to describe their mind-sets, their reasons for working in what might have been described as the enemy's camp. They all told the interviewers (all those who I heard, at any rate) that it was their desire to see justice done for their people, in their neighborhoods, that moved them to take on the uniform. These were people from all over the United States. They were, in essence, called to enter an unfriendly and dangerous atmosphere to do the work of justice.

If demonstrators were to look only to police uniforms before reaching their conclusions about the goodness or evil of the individual police officers who wear them, they run the risk of mistaking wheat for weeds. That's why Jesus tells us that it is the angels – God's messengers – who will make those determinations because it is God's prerogative to make judgments about people being good or evil; saints or sinners. That's not something for us to do.

Jesus' parable reminds us that there is diversity in our world. Intentionally created diversity. Divinely made diversity. When we try to divide people into two camps, and then align ourselves with one and reject the humanity of those in the other camp, we can lose the ability to see that we have common goals of survival. And we can't bring to bear our collective best interests in working toward a better world; in promoting the existence of heaven on earth.

Wow. So how do we live in righteousness, how do we work for justice, how do we fight for equality and still consider those who we think are doing evil as part of humanity with whom we must work until the end of time? This is a tall order for us. Jesus tells us not to jump to conclusions. Jesus tells us that the weeds are welcome to grow to maturity right alongside the wheat. And only then, "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire..." (Matthew 13:41-42a).

Yes, this waiting, this call to work together is a lot to ask of imperfect human beings. But this weekend, as we mourn the death of U.S. Representative John Lewis from cancer, we have an example of someone who knew how to wait. Someone we can look to as a mentor.

As you undoubtedly know, but I will summarize, he worked as a young man with various Civil Rights organizations in the 1960's. He was the youngest person to speak at the March on Washington in 1963. He was beaten (almost to death, twice) and he was arrested more than forty times as a result of his efforts to achieve justice for Black people in this country. He served seventeen terms in Congress, representing the people of a segment of Atlanta, Georgia.

Among the many things that he wished to achieve – many of which he, in fact, succeeded with – was the creation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture as part of the Smithsonian museums in Washington, DC. He introduced the bill to accomplish the creation of the museum thirteen times before it passed in the House, then passed in the Senate and then was signed into law by then-President George W. Bush. It was not until President Barak Obama was in office that the museum finally opened to the public. But Representative Lewis just waited to let that seed grow until it was mature. He patiently and faithfully introduced the legislation time and again, so that it would come to fruition. And, when it was time, the justice of telling the story of both America's sins toward

Black people of this country and of many of the accomplishments of those people in this country finally was accomplished.

Why will God allow evil to grow alongside good? Well, maybe that's not a question we will ever learn the answer to. But it's God's creation, so it's God's prerogative to allow whatever God chooses to grow in it. But it occurs to me that, since we understand ourselves to be both saints and sinners, maybe the purely evil are with the good so that we can recognize evil in ourselves. While we wait for the maturing of the harvest, we have the opportunity to sit with our own beings, with our own behavior, and ask ourselves if, at any given moment, we are choosing the path of good, the way of righteousness. And, once we have answered that question, we have the opportunity, having identified the sin and having found the kernels of evil in our beings (because we all admit that we are sinners, as well as saints) – we have the opportunity to repent and to receive God's spirit to transform our lives.

Another reason why God may choose to have evil thriving with god, is that evil may be worked on and worked out of this world because it is contrasted to, but also paired with, good and righteousness. Sometimes an example of righteousness will bring evil to its knees. Because, as Jesus taught us, “all things are possible with God” (Matthew 19:26). Jesus tells us that it takes time to do his work in this world. So who are we to tell Jesus how to order the world and to tell God how to reshape creation? After all, have we done such a good job with our ordering and shaping of creation? I think not.

Now, more than ever, while we actively work for justice in our society; while we receive God's Holy Spirit into our beings so we can be transformed, we wait. We don't sit back. We are active, but we wait for God's time to come to its fullness. We wait for “the furnace of fire,” we wait for the “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And we wait for the righteous (whoever they may turn out to be in the end) ... [to] shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Matthew 13:42-43.)

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: AMEN