

A WEED BY ANY OTHER NAME

07.19.26 Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

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Experienced gardeners define a weed as any plant growing where you don't want it to grow. It may be a perfect rose, but if it's growing in the middle of your tomato patch, it's a weed. Or it may be a perfect tomato plant, producing gloriously delicious fruit, but if it's in the middle of your flowerbed, well...

The trick is being able to identify the plants you want from the ones you don't. When plants are seedlings, just popping up out of the ground, they all tend to look alike: ragweed, tomato, rose, daisy, carrot, radish, marigold, crabgrass. When they're only ½ inch tall, they all look pretty much the same.

Start pulling up what you think are the ragweed and the crabgrass and you're likely to pull up the flowers and vegetables, too. Start pulling up and throwing out what you think are the sinners and tax collectors and you're likely to pull up and throw away the children of God.

IN THE SCRIPTURE

Jesus illustrates this point in a parable:

A wealthy farmer (he must be wealthy as he owns land and has farmhands working for him) sows wheat seeds in his field. After dark, some enemy of his comes along and sows the field with weed seeds. When the wheat and weeds sprout and grow, the farmer's field hands discover the weeds and run to their boss in a panic. What should we do? But first they want to know who is to blame for this travesty.

"Boss, did you buy the cheap seeds? You always buy good stuff. What happened?"

The boss replies: "I did buy good seeds, but someone who has it in for me and wishes to do me harm found some weed seeds, somewhere, and sowed them in with my wheat."

The field hands are incensed. "We should get out there right now and pull up all those weeds." And if they're anything like the field hands I worked with when I was young, they would add, "And then we should find out who did this and put a beatin' on 'em."

But the boss is cool and calm. "No, we're not going to do either of those things. First, we don't know who did the damage, so we can't go around willy-nilly beating up people we suspect. And second, if you all go dashing out there to pull up the weeds, you'll trample the young wheat stalks, and some will be pulled up and thrown away with the weeds."

He has a better plan: do nothing. At least for now. Let the wheat and weeds grow together. Then, when they're mature, we can harvest them and separate them—good wheat into the barn, bad weeds into the incinerator.

In other words, we do not rush to judge them by what they seem to be now, when they're young, but by what they mature into. Rushes to judgement, especially moral rushes to judgement almost always do more harm than good.

EXAMPLES FROM THE NEWS

The organizers of the 2026 *Enhanced Games* in Las Vegas promised an athletic spectacle of “smashed world records.” Competitors in swimming, track, weightlifting, and strongman/powerlifting events would compete without the rules that established governing bodies like the Olympic Committee and the NCAA, NBA, and NFL place on competition. For the Enhancement Games, performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) would be not just allowed but encouraged.

And instead of competing for a trophy, the athletes would compete for cash: \$2 million per event, distributed from first to seventh place. In an optimistic rush to judgment, investors and promoters immediately jumped on board what they were promised would be an event destined to change the world of athletic competition.

The *Enhanced Games*, however, failed to deliver on what was advertised. Many of the enhanced athletes, looked good on the dais – big muscles, washboard abs, that kind of thing – but they were decades older than the unenhanced competitors. In actual competition, they not only failed to win; most of them finished out of the money and, in a couple of cases, dead last.

Only one world record was set, and that one was set by a much-enhanced swimmer wearing an otherwise illegal swimsuit in the 50-meter freestyle.

Promoters went home embarrassed. Investors went home broke.

Rushes to judgment are not limited to sports and business, however.

When I.C.E. agents killed American citizens Renée Good and Alex Pretti in separate incidents in Minneapolis last January rushes to judgement were many and loud. Activists and politicians on the left insisted that the ICE agents who did the shooting be immediately arrested and charged with murder. On the other side of the aisle, within hours homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem publicly declared, with no evidence whatsoever, that both victims had committed “acts of domestic terrorism.”

Both of these were textbook cases of rushed judgment. High-stakes accusation made to shape public perception before the facts were known, and compromising the subsequent investigation.

“Domestic terrorism,” it turns out, has a specific legal definition requiring intent to intimidate civilians or influence government policy—something that could not be known immediately.

The FBI criticized pronouncements from both sides as narratives outrunning evidence, warning that premature labeling undermines public trust and investigative integrity. Early

statements are usually shaped more by political narrative than verified information and narratives formed too quickly can harden into public belief even after contrary facts emerge.

In recent elections, members of the left end of the Democratic Party have done surprisingly well. Candidates who identify as Democratic Socialists have won two mayoral elections -- Seattle and New York -- and one primary. But it has hardly been a groundswell, as some insist.

Commentators on the right, however, are so concerned that they have decided to identify them, and all Democrats now, not as Democratic Socialists but as Communists. In fact, our president used that term 14 times in a 30-minute speech at Mt. Rushmore on July 3 and nine more times in his July 4 "Salute to America" speech in Washington.

While professional political scientists and high school civics teachers will both tell us there is a world of difference between Communists and Democratic Socialists, the hope of the speakers is that listeners will rush to judge them all as one and the same.

THE ART OF DISCERNMENT

What we are talking about here is discernment. Political and economic discernment to be sure but, more importantly, Christian moral discernment.

No one would argue that a quick judgement and decision is never appropriate. When the building is on fire or about to collapse in on itself -- as with the Pfizer building in New York last week -- a quick decision to get everyone out is altogether appropriate.

Last week 14-year-old Royal Cawthorne was riding his bike in Phoenix and the temperature was over 100 degrees. He noticed an elderly woman walking along the sidewalk in a sparsely populated area on the edge of town. She seemed disoriented and weak, weaving as she walked so he approached her. He was wearing smart glasses so the entire encounter is recorded on his phone. He gently questioned her and discovered she had been to the grocery to pick up a few things she was carrying in two bags and she was walking home when she missed some turns and got lost. He coaxed her into the shade and convinced her to sit down and gave her a drink of water from the bottle he carries on his bike. Eventually helped her remember her son's phone number which he called for her. The son called first responders who, in Phoenix, are well equipped to deal with heat related issues.

Royal stayed with her until help and her son arrived just a few minutes later. The 75-year-old lady, whose name was withheld at the request of her family, is grateful for Royal's help. Her family says he's, their hero.

Royal's rush to judge that something was wrong was appropriate and fortunate.

But, more often, we find ourselves pressured to make decisions amid competing voices, loud noises, and an avalanche of half-truths and bad information thriving on electronic and social media. It is at these times when rushes to judgment can do actual harm.

On a quiet evening in August of 2019 in Aurora, Colorado, a young man named Elijah McClain was walking home from a convenience store. He was slight of build, gentle in spirit, and those who knew him said he was so shy that he often apologized when he thought he might be inconveniencing someone. He wore a ski mask because he was anemic and got cold easily. He hummed to himself as he walked — something he did when he felt nervous.

Someone saw him and thought his movements looked “odd.” They called 911. And from that moment on, every person who encountered Elijah made a snap judgment about him.

When police arrived, they didn’t see a soft-spoken massage therapist heading home with an iced tea. They saw a threat. They assumed he was dangerous. They assumed he was on drugs. They assumed his nervousness was aggression. And assumption piled on assumption until they forced him to the ground.

By the time paramedics arrived, the rush to judgment was already in full motion. Without speaking to Elijah, without checking his vital signs, without asking what was wrong, they decided he was in a condition called “excited delirium.” They injected him with a powerful sedative meant for someone far larger than he was. His body couldn’t handle it. Elijah went into cardiac arrest and never woke up.

Later, when people learned who he really was -- how he played violin for shelter animals, how he apologized to people he hadn’t even harmed, how he told the officers, “I’m just different” -- the tragedy became even sharper. The world saw what the first responders did not: a beloved child of God whose life was cut short because people rushed to judgment instead of pausing to understand.

Elijah’s story reminds us how quickly fear can masquerade as certainty, how easily assumptions can harden into decisions, and how dangerous it is when we act on our judgments before we truly see the person in front of us.

It’s a modern parable of what happens when we fail to listen, fail to look carefully, fail to remember that every person we meet carries the image of God.

Good, appropriate, authentic judgments emerge from discernment: looking and listening and weighing what we see and hear before we judge. As Christians, we bring together the lessons of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and apply them to the problems that come before us.

In the now-canceled TV series “Blue Bloods,” every episode ended at the Reagan family dinner table. It’s a noisy place—police officers, lawyers, parents, siblings—all bringing their own experiences, convictions, and blind spots. They don’t always agree. In fact, sometimes the conversation gets tense. But they stay at the table. They listen. They weigh each other’s words. They test motives. And slowly, through honest conversation and shared values, clarity begins to emerge.

It’s a picture of Christian discernment. Contrary to what we hear from the moralistic therapeutic deism that passes as religion in popular culture, we rarely hear God’s voice in

isolation. More often, God speaks through the people who love us enough to tell the truth, challenge our assumptions, and remind us of who we are.

In a world full of loud opinions and quick reactions, discernment grows when we remain at the table—patient, humble, and willing to listen. That’s where the weeds become obvious, where wisdom takes root, and where God often reveals the way forward.

Amen.