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'The Awkward Squad' (Matthew 13:24-30)

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Let the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest!

I don't know if many of us are really up to taking that advice! Most of us are more inclined toward weed pulling. We're sorely tempted to have a week pulling spree! Of course, in today's parable, Jesus wasn't talking about plant weeds and wheat! He was also pointing out that many of us are also inclined toward pulling people out of our lives, if we see as weeds.

We see WEEDS APLENTY in our towns, our churches, our government, our schools, in our dealings with people in any group! We think that we have the answers. We know how to solve matters – have a weed pulling spree!

It seems that wherever you happen to be, there's always ONE! You know, the person at another table in the restaurant who loudly hold forth their views so that the whole room can hear what they're saying. (And without wearing a facemask!)

Or that person in a meeting, where everyone knows no matter what the subject, this particular person will always disagree and vote no.

Or the one member of your family, who for some unknown reason, is always incredibly difficult. (Hence the term 'Black Sheep?')

Movies have been produced about that one person on a jury who refuses to go along with the otherwise unanimous verdict and insists on keeping the jury for hours or maybe days or weeks because he or she will not budge! One such famous and intriguing movie is 'Twelve Angry Men.' I encourage you to watch this classic film. This Pandemic time is a great time to catch up on classics and new movies!

People like this are members of what we might call the 'Awkward Squad, and EVERY community, whether it's your family, the Town Board, the church, local schools or the neighborhood pub, has them. 'They' refuse to conform and refuse to fit in with everyone else. We are seeing this these days as people refuse to wear facemasks, insist on gathering in large groups and disagree about school and church reopenings. Mostly, they make life difficult, prickly and uncomfortable. Some communities deal with the Awkward Squad by pulling or removing them.

The Roman Catholic Church has often dealt with dissident theologians and members by excommunicating them. Some time ago, I visited a church member at a retirement center. I made a bad joke during this visit! This woman wanted to attend the worship service there, but was hesitant to do so because we would also walk in late. The service was being held that day by an area Catholic Priest, so I responded to her hesitation by saying, "Oh, let's go...what can they do to US? We can't be excommunicated...we're not Catholic!" She laughed and we went. The Priest did a wonderful service, by the way!

But, back to pulling weeds! Schools can and do suspend or expel their most difficult students. Trade union members who refuse to strike with their colleagues are ostracized or sometimes bullied or beat up or worse!

Some countries have in the past dealt with their criminals by sending them to places like Australia or Siberia. And there are churches who refuse to be (either upfront and officially or in more subtle ways) open and welcoming to those who don't fit certain criteria and tradition.

Whatever the situation, it may be true that a community of like-minded people who are pulling in the same direction is a more comfortable place than the one which has in it members of the Awkward Squad. People who think alike can go on with things without constant interruptions and arguments. Discussion flows smoothly, people feel warm and safe and comfy.

I pastored a church years ago, whose search committee informed me that they wanted some change, new people, and church growth. However, I soon discovered that they would not go forward with a decision if even one person in their church disagreed. It was that simple. That is how they handled themselves to avoid conflict. The church is still one without much obvious conflict, but it also has not changed or grown. It is in many ways, like a museum! Any approach can go too far!

Community groups who allow open discussion, give and take, can be far less comfortable places to be. Arguments and dissension happen,

sometimes it takes longer to get things done, and there can be anxious and hurt feelings.

Yet, at the end of the day, it sometimes turns out that the Awkward Squad are valuable members. They are the ones who challenge people to stop and think. They are the ones who can inspire our thinking forward!

Like Galileo, who insisted that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the solar system: despite all the evidence to the contrary, and despite being tortured and excommunicated because of his views. Galileo turned out to be a forerunner of modern science!

They are the ones in our communities who refuse to allow us to sit back in complacent comfort. Instead, they force us to debate and discuss and think through what we're about. So, we might end up on the right path for the right reasons, instead of just letting things happen as always. Still, however beneficial members of the Awkward Squad may be to us, they are often judged to be a royal pain or maybe even evil by everyone else!

Today, Jesus is warning us against such judgement. Jesus said, in Matthew, chapter 7, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." And then, he followed this up with the funny story of someone who tried to remove the speck of dust from a friend's eye, while the whole time, had a plank in their own eye!

Or as the version The Message puts it, "Don't pick on other people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults; unless of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt?"

Today's story of the weeds found growing amongst the wheat is just another example of Jesus' attitude of inclusiveness! The farming week Jesus was referring to is called darnell. When this particular weed begins to grow, it looks almost the same as the wheat it grows amongst. It's only when both plants, the Darnell and the wheat are mature, near harvest time, that it becomes clear which is darnell and which is wheat. And then, only by the harvester, who is the expert!

The farmers Jesus told this parable to would have known exactly the plants he was talking about. It's also interesting to know that the harvester is told to harvest the wheat and store it in the barn for future food; but to collect the weeds first and bundle them to be burned. You see, even the weeds had an ultimate use, because those bundles would be used in the future as fuel for heating and cooking.

To those farmers, the message is crystal clear. None of us has the right to judge the other. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "You judge by human standards; I judge on one."

We don't really know what is in someone's heart, nor where they've been! Only God knows, only God understands it all and is awesomely forgiving. Only God is in any position to judge. Hence, our United Church of Christ slogan, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!"

We should welcome the Awkward Squad! They are the ones who dare to rock the boat, ruffle the surface, and who can bring real honesty into the church. I have heard from colleagues that by having online Worship Services right now, many people who may feel awkward or unwelcome in our sanctuaries are joining in the online Worship Services. May we reach out and may they feel welcome in our in-person Worship Services as our church reopens in the future!

Because a church that allows open discussion is usually a church which is alive and growing. When we welcome the Awkward Squad, it allows us to learn what we are all about and what loving is all about. All that is **not** to say that as Christians, we should not place loving boundaries on unacceptable behavior, or discourage one another to grow in God's ways.

But, hey, in fear and in courage, who knows what could happen? Apparently, when it comes to harvesting people, only God can do it. So, let's be the faithful workers and believers on God's farm, and let us be the strong, healthy, best plants we can be, with God's help.

AND FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, LEAVE THE REST TO GOD! Amen.