

Wheat and Weeds Together

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Texts: Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

When Pat and I bought our home on the Sundstein Road a little over 20 years ago, it was winter. The plot of land on which our house sits consists of about 5 acres; much of it wooded. The unwooded area immediately to the south of the house was kind of a mystery to us when we first saw it, because it was blanketed with a foot of snow. When we asked the former owner what was under the snow, he said, “Oh, you know, lawn.”

Where I grew up, in Ohio, “lawn” meant grass. But what we discovered after the snow melted was that while there was indeed some grass out there, there was also a lot of other stuff growing with it: dandelions—tons of dandelions--crabgrass, ragweed, clover, and a variety of other vegetation which we assumed to be in the general category of “weeds.” Weeds, after all, are just plants with a bad press agent. We briefly considered “treating” our yard, but we ultimately decided just to let it be, to mow it from time to time to keep the ticks under some semblance of control, but not to try to dig up the weeds, or to put chemicals on the yard to kill them.

We discovered that in addition to saving a lot of time, money and frustration, not to mention the birds and the bees, our course of non-action gave us beautiful wildflowers: red, orange, violet, yellow, white, and blue to break up that endless green. When it’s mowed, our yard looks like a lawn from a distance, at least; but

the part of the yard that we no longer mow is a field of flowers. In the Northwoods, the wildflowers are our calendar, just as the changing colors of paraments and pastoral stoles in our sanctuary are our church calendar.

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew is a parable about a field, which is really the world, a field that has both wheat and weeds. The weeds aren't just any weeds, however. The word translated as "weeds" has a very specific meaning. It refers to what is called "darnel grass," or "bearded darnel." I'm no expert on plants, but people who are tell us that darnel grass looks exactly like wheat in its early stages of development. You can't tell it's not wheat until it reaches maturity, and produces no grain. The other thing about darnel grass is that its roots get entwined with the roots of other plants. If you try to pull up the darnel grass in a wheat field, chances are that you'll pull up wheat as well.

One of the frustrations of the gospels is that they're about Jesus, but they weren't written by Jesus. In fact we have no record that Jesus wrote anything, except maybe something in the sand when he saved the life of a woman who was about to be stoned by some judgmental types. And even in the things he said, Jesus often didn't just come out and tell people things. He told stories to illustrate what he wanted to get across. But we're separated by centuries and distance from the culture in which those stories made the most sense, and besides, even in that culture they weren't always understood by those who heard them. It was often the case that the point of a particular story was so counter-intuitive that it simply defied understanding. "You don't get it, do you?" Jesus repeatedly asked his disciples.

But here in today's reading is a parable so basic that we understand it, even if we have some difficulty accepting its moral thrust. Let's face it, most of us are inveterate weeders. In our garden we have a little sign, given to us by our dear late

church secretary Nan, that reads “weed ‘em and reap.” We want to separate the weeds from the grass, or the weeds from the flowers, or the weeds from the tomato plants. That’s why the hoe was invented. It isn’t just a matter of esthetics; sometimes we need to get rid of the weeds so that they won’t choke out the plants we want to grow. So, as diligent gardeners, we have a lot of trouble with Jesus’ *laissez-faire* attitude toward weeds. If we don’t get rid of the weeds, we’re putting all those good plants at risk.

But in this parable, remember, these are not ordinary weeds. These are weeds that look like good plants, and get all tangled up with the good plants. You can’t tell them apart from the plants you want to grow until it’s almost too late. So there’s a risk in taking action. The risk is that in trying to get rid of the weeds, you’ll pull the good plants up with them. What’s the faithful gardener to do? “Let them grow together,” Jesus says, “and in due time, at the harvest, things will get sorted out.”

Jesus is addressing the problem of evil in the world. He doesn’t tell us how it is that evil came to be, other than that an enemy has planted it. During one of my earlier lives, I studied, and taught courses on Zoroastrianism, a religion of ancient Iran that actually influenced Judaism, and, indirectly, Christianity and Islam. The Magi who came to Bethlehem were probably Zoroastrians. Zoroastrians saw the world as a battleground between good and evil, with wise and moral human choice leading to the ultimate triumph of the good. The Zoroastrians are theological optimists.

When I was at Columbia University, I spent a year on a Fulbright fellowship among the Parsees, the Zoroastrians of India—which is where they fled after the Islamic conquest of Iran. I was in much demand in Bombay as a visiting scholar, and, at their request I gave lectures to people about their own religion, because their own priests saw their religion as a set of ritual practices rather than as a belief

system. It happens. It happened to Christianity. After one lecture, during a Q and A session, a Parsee asked me what I most appreciated about their faith. I said I appreciated the Zoroastrian recognition of the reality of evil. Soon a line formed at the microphone. Never a good sign. It turned out that these were Parsees who had been influenced by Hindu teachings and by the theories of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, who taught that evil is an illusion. Oh well.

In today's parable, Jesus is reminding his followers of the reality of evil, and, at the same time, telling us that we can't eradicate it. For us inveterate weeders, that reality is hard to accept. We expect that we can detect the weeds, evil itself, through the power of our own observation. We look for the easiest and quickest way to identify evil and to get rid of it. Human history is littered with examples of this natural tendency. When Germany was defeated in the First World War, the blame fell not on the leaders who made the fateful miscalculation of getting into the war in the first place, but on those aliens, those people who were different, the Jews. And so the Nazis set out to eradicate, which literally means to "pull up by the roots," those aliens, those weeds. Just so with the Turks and the Armenians. Look into any genocide, and you'll find an overzealous gardener and that gardener's all-too-eager helpers.

Even today there are many people in our society who believe that the name of someone's religion is the measure of that person's worth and righteousness. But, trust me, it's not so easy. I know that in my life I've been surprised by the goodness of people who I thought were very different from me, and by the evil deeds committed by people who I thought were a lot like me, whose religion was my religion. I remember a visit to Turkey, when I went to a missionary cemetery on the grounds of a hospital that had been abandoned for many years. The grounds themselves were overgrown, and the missionaries were long gone. A grandson of missionaries who had been buried there during the 1930's, a New York lawyer,

had asked me to find out if there was any trace of that old cemetery and his grandparents' graves. When I arrived on the scene I saw two carefully tended neat rows of stone markers, the grass mown around them, in the middle of the otherwise weedy and untended hospital grounds. No one had asked these Muslim Turkish neighbors to do that; no one had expected them to do that. They had done it out of love and respect, not only the people who actually knew the missionaries, but their descendants as well, who knew them only by reputation.

But I also remember visiting in 1982 the killing grounds of a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut where the cold-blooded murder of defenseless women and children had been carried out by men wearing crosses like the one I wear. Not only did they kill Palestinians, they threatened to kill foreign medical workers in the camp hospital, including some who were there because our denomination sent them. "No Christian would help Palestinians," these Christian militiamen said in explanation. "They have to be rooted out." It really isn't easy to distinguish the weeds from the wheat, and we can do great damage when we try.

Perhaps the clue to the nature of our dilemma is that it's not so easy to distinguish the good and the evil within ourselves. We all have weeds growing within us, weeds that look like good plants. Paul put it this way in his letter to the church in Rome: "The power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up" (Eugene Peterson's rendering). Within each of us there is this complex intertwining of good and evil. We struggle against evil, but if we're honest, as Paul was, we have to be realistic. We know that when we're most certain, most self-righteous, we're most likely to do the most awful things. Letting the weeds and the wheat of our souls grow together means living with uncertainty, but trusting in God to sort things out.

Here's the good news that comes in our Epistle lesson for the day. In God there is the grace to see us through. "In hope we were saved," St. Paul says. "In hope, we were saved." Not by our brains; not by our power; not by our wealth; not by our status; what saves us is the hope that is in each one of us. It is the gift of the grace of God.

Let the wheat and the weeds grow together, Jesus tells us, and let God sort things out. Trust in God's grace, St. Paul tells us. Yes, the whole creation groans, waiting for things to be sorted out. And yes, we in our innermost beings, where the soul provides the soil for both wheat and weeds, struggle within ourselves. But our God is a gracious God. And nothing, nothing in all the world or above the world, nothing we do and nothing done to us—nothing! not death nor life, nor any imaginable power or human principality, nothing! not even in our own flawed natures, can separate us from God, the wise and compassionate gardener. Nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Amen.