

Weed Control

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Matthew 13:24-30 (NRSV)

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; [25] but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. [26] So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. [27] And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' [28] He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' [29] But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. [30] Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

Matthew 13:37-43 (NRSV)

He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; [38] the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, [39] and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. [40] Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. [41] The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, [42] and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. [43] Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

WEED CONTROL

Weeds, everywhere you go they're there. No matter how hard you try to get rid of them they just seem to make their way into our pristine yard. If I didn't know better I would swear that someone, an enemy perhaps had deliberately come into my yard at night and sown weeds.

Of course that's not true. Whoever heard of anybody trying to get back at their neighbor by sowing crabgrass in their neighbor's lawn? Weeds just happen. They're a part of every lawn.

My father used to take pride in our rather large lawn. But, as he got older the weeds got the upper hand. When I suggested that he spray the lawn to kill the weeds, he said, "If I killed the weeds, I wouldn't have anything green left."

He had a point, and I suspect the same could be said for many of our lawns. If we killed the weeds, we might not have much left. So what's a person to do?

I have my own theory. I let the weeds grow right along with the grass! Instead of cutting the grass low to minimize the look of the weeds, I wait until the grass and weeds grow tall. And then

I cut the grass with my lawn mower set at the highest level. The grass is strong at that higher level and will even choke out the weeds ... at least to a certain extent.

But, in order to do this you have to be patient, you have to cut the grass more often, and you have to be willing to leave the weeds alone. As some of my neighbors have proved, any attempt to get rid of the weeds by scalping the lawn will assure you of a yard filled with nothing but weeds!

WEEDS AND WHEAT

I think Jesus is making much the same point in our lesson for today. But, instead of talking about lawns he's talking about fields of wheat. As I noted last week, the wheat harvest was very important. This was no matter of casual interest. If the harvest was bad some sharecroppers wouldn't have enough to eat for the coming year.

And so weeds in the wheat field weren't just a matter of pride. It was a matter of life and death.

If the weeds choked out the crop, people could die. That's why the servants in the parable were so upset when the weeds appeared.

But, getting rid of the weeds was not a simple matter.

I'm told that in the early stages of development the weeds and the wheat look just alike. And when the difference between the weeds and the wheat becomes obvious it's too late to eliminate the problem.

The weeds and the wheat are so entangled together that any attempt to remove the weeds would also result in the destruction of the wheat as well.

What's a farmer to do?

In Jesus' parable the owner of the field says,

"Leave the weeds alone. If you try to destroy the weeds, you will also destroy the wheat. Wait until harvest time, and then we'll be able to separate the weeds from the wheat. We'll throw the weeds into the fire, and we'll gather the wheat into the barn."

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

Of course a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. What's the spiritual point of this practical parable?

Jesus made it plain to his disciples. Yes, there is evil seed in this world, and this evil seed is in competition with the good seed sown by God in Christ.

But, you cannot defeat evil by attacking it directly. In trying to uproot the evil in the world you can destroy the very essence of who we are called to be in Christ Jesus. We can become the very things that we hate and fear.

So how should a disciple of Christ respond to the weeds that invade our world? How do we deal with evil?

First, we need to understand that it is not possible to isolate ourselves from evil. Weeds will grow in every yard or garden, and evil will be a part of every community.

Almost every night the local news is the same. Some terrible event has happened. Someone has been killed in a bad part of town.

But, sometimes the news is even worse. A terrible crime has been committed by someone in an upscale, gated community, and a distraught homeowner tells the reporter, "I didn't think something like that could happen in our neighborhood."

Believe it. Something like that can happen in any of our communities. None of us are immune from the effects of evil. Bad things do happen to all people, good and bad, rich and poor; the weeds grow on both sides of the track.

More than that, the Bible also tells us that all people do bad things. The weeds that invade our garden come not only from our neighbor but also from our own garden as well.

It is a fruitless task to try and separate our lives from the evil in the world. Evil is an integral part of the world. Sin is pervasive in our world. And ironically, the more we try to separate ourselves from this sinful world, the more we try to root out the evil weeds, the more the weeds seem to take over.

This has been apparent throughout history. Quite often when the church tried to impose its will on a nation or nations the result was not a holy community but a holy war.

I think that one of the reasons our country has been successful is that we have in large part lived by this parable. We may be discouraged by what we perceive to be the evil weeds that grow in our country. But, we have learned from hard experience that when we forcibly remove the weeds we often destroy true faith as well.

In order to live in a free country we need to believe in the strength of the seed that we sow. If we sow the truth, the word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, that truth will eventually prevail and flourish.

JUDGMENT DELAYED

Quite often when things go wrong we ask, "Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't God destroy the evil weeds in the world?"

I have no final answer to that question. The only thing I can say is that perhaps judgment just isn't our job. In the end the Lord of the harvest will judge and destroy the seeds of the evil one. Judgment is God's job, and God has decided to wait until the end. And if God waits until the end, maybe we should do the same.

We must have enough faith to wait for the harvest of righteousness and justice. This means that we must resist the temptation to isolate ourselves from the world in an attempt to be holy.

Jesus suggests the opposite approach. If you're going to live in God's garden, you better get used to being among wheat and weeds.

I think that there are several reasons that we are called to live in a world filled with weeds and wheat. First, just as strong healthy strands of grass can eventually choke out the weeds, so God's people living in the world but not being of the world can make a big difference.

Jesus said that we are to be the salt of the earth. We give the world a different flavor by remaining true to what we believe despite all that is going on around us.

Just a little salt can make a big difference in the taste of a dish, and just a few committed Christian disciples can make a big difference in the world.

There's another more miraculous reason that God delays his judgment of the weeds. Sometimes God takes seeds that were sown by the evil one and uses those seeds for his own purposes. And sometimes God even changes weeds into wheat.

The Bible is replete with stories that suggest this is true. Faithless, selfish and even violent people become the bearers of God's grace. What we mean for evil is sometimes transformed into something good. (Genesis 50:20)

Maybe that's why all of us should be a bit less judgmental about the weeds that live among us. God might be using the weeds for a greater purpose, and who knows, maybe we might be a weed as well!

WEEDS AND WHEAT IN EVERY GARDEN

When we hear this parable we automatically assume that we are the wheat. We assume that we are the righteous ones, the good ones who deserve God's grace and must be patient with those awful, weedy persons who live next door.

But, is that really true? I think not. I think that all of us are a mixture of weeds and wheat, good and evil.

Do we really want God to judge the weeds, the evil in our life right now? Might the destruction of our enemies also mean our own destruction as well? I think that it's a good thing that God

waits, that God takes his time when it comes to judgment. And I would suggest that we should be willing to wait with God.

Now don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that we should take my Father's approach and just be content with weeds because they are green and don't look too bad at a distance. I believe that it is possible to be righteous without being self-righteous.

But, just be aware that weed removal is a never ending process. And we don't have control over the weeds in our neighbor's yard. We only have control over the weeds that are in our own yard!

If we're going to do any weeding, we should begin with our own lives. As Jesus put it, instead of trying to remove the speck in our neighbor's eye, perhaps we should be content with removing the log in our own eye.

I must admit that this has not been an easy parable to follow. When I see weeds in the church and the world, my tendency is to pluck them up, to eliminate them at all costs.

I am very conservative from a moral standpoint. I tell people that I am something of a "Neo-Puritan." I feel uncomfortable in a post modern world in which people think that theology and doctrine don't matter, and morality is a matter of personal choice. Every time I hear someone say that there are many ways to God I cringe.

Sometimes I think that I was born too late. When I look at attitudes in the modern world compared to what I believe I feel a bit like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, "Gee Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas any more."

THE GOOD OLD DAYS WEREN'T THAT GOOD

But, I have also come to understand that it is not my job to run the world or rail against the world. It is not my job to always condemn the secularity of the modern world. A return to the good old days when religion played a larger role in government and society is not the answer.

In fact the good old days were not that good, and recently we have seen frightening examples of what can happen when religious leaders try to dominate the government and impose their will on the people. Sometimes what passes for orthodox theology is nothing more than personal prejudice and narrow mindedness. In the name of true religion, terrible things continue to be done all over the world.

In my opinion, societies based upon a certain theology, so called theocracies almost always tend to be repressive. It doesn't really make any difference if the theology is Christian or Islamic or whatever.

If a certain religious group is put in charge of pulling up society's weeds they almost always end up destroying the wheat as well. They see very clearly the weeds in their neighbor's yard, but they fail to see the fact that their own yard is in desperate need of weeding as well.

I think Jesus understood the danger of making faith into a political movement. Jesus told the Roman governor, Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world. Jesus told his disciples that his kingdom was not about having power and control over others. Jesus preached a message of grace and freedom over against the religion of the day that was intent upon policing the morality of the people.

In Jesus' day elaborate and nitpicking religious laws were a heavy burden on the people. In their attempt to weed the garden of society these leaders missed the more important points of God's law. These blind guides had, as Jesus put it, strained at a gnat while swallowing a camel. More than that, they even found themselves opposing the very incarnation of God's love and law in the person of Jesus Christ.

At its heart God's law is a means of grace. The law is God's way of helping us to live the good life. But, the religious leaders of Jesus' day (like many religious leaders today) insisted on making the law into an instrument of harsh judgment. Their main concern was about who was "in" and who was "out" when it came to God's kingdom.

GOD ALONE IS THE JUDGE

Now don't misunderstand. Jesus did say that eventually there would be a day of reckoning, a day of judgment. But, the time and place of that day was up to God and not up to them. The day of reckoning would take place in God's time not when we decide.

To put it another way, Jesus told the religious leaders of his day that the decision about who is in and who is out is a decision that is above their pay grade. Their job, according to Jesus was to promote the love and justice of God in their own time.

And that is our job as well. Instead of focusing on the weeds we are to focus on the wheat. Instead of focusing on all that is wrong with the world we are to focus on and cultivate the wheat of God's gracious kingdom, the opportunities for love and service that come our way each and every day.

This past Sunday our adult Sunday school class studied what went on at General Assembly this year. Suffice it to say that some of the same controversies that were dogging the denomination when I was ordained are still nipping at our heels.

No matter what our views on these controversies many on both sides have reached the point that they don't want to deal with these problems any more. They say in effect,

"If those other people don't want to agree with us let them leave the denomination. Maybe it's time that we weeded our garden and become a less argumentative and pure church." But, today's

lesson seems to be saying that we're stuck with each other. Any attempt to divide the church on the basis of who is right and who is wrong would be pure disaster.

In fact today's parable is a warning against claiming to know the mind of God. What at first blush might appear good and pure to us might not be either one. What is in a person's heart is not always apparent.

BUMPER STICKER MORALITY

Have you ever met someone who presented themselves as a saintly sort only to find out that they're not that way at all?

There's a story going around about a man who was stopped, waiting for the light to turn green. When the light changed, he was distracted and he didn't budge.

The woman in the car behind him honked her horn. He still didn't move. She honked again. By this time, she was pounding on the steering wheel and blowing her horn non-stop. Finally, just as the light turned yellow, the fellow in the first car woke up and drove through the light. The woman in the second car was beside herself.

Still mid-rant, she heard a tap on her car window. She looked up to see the face of a police officer. "Lady, you're under arrest," he said. "Get out of the car. Put your hands up." He took her to the police station, had her finger printed, photographed, and then put her in a holding cell. Hours passed.

The officer returned and unlocked the cell door. He escorted her back to the booking desk.

"Sorry for the mistake, Lady," he said. "But I pulled up behind you as you were blowing your horn and cursing out the fellow in front of you. I noticed the stickers on your bumper. One read "Follow me to Sunday School." The other, "What Would Jesus Do?" So, naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.

It is dangerous to wear our piety on our sleeve or on our bumpers. Those who make a big display of their righteousness and feel superior to everyone else often are judged quite harshly when they fall. Only God knows who and what is useful in the kingdom. The distinction between weeds and wheat is often difficult to make.

AN UNLIKELY SAINT

A minister told of a friend who cursed like a sailor and had a "heart as big as the Gulf of Mexico." She was not, as this minister put it, "the kind of person you would find serving punch in the church fellowship hall."

But, she did start the shelter movement in Atlanta. Once she stopped a knife fight at one the shelters by walking calmly between two combatants and saying, “You guys know better than this.” And that was that.

When one of the homeless men who frequented the shelter died she claimed his body, paid for the cremation and waited for a family member to come and claim the remains. When no one came she asked the rector of a downtown church if she could place the ashes in the church’s memorial garden.

The rector said, “Our policies only allow the remains of relatives to be placed here.” The feisty lady replied, “Perfect. He was my brother.”

Sometimes it’s very difficult to tell the difference between weeds and wheat, the good and the bad. So, maybe we should just leave the weeds alone.

I know.

It’s not an easy thing to do. We always think that we need to be in charge and judge who’s right and who’s wrong in any given situation. But, the fact of the matter is this. I can’t fix you, and you can’t fix me. Only God can do that. And God will do that in God’s own time.

In the meantime let us hold fast to that hope, and trust God’s providential care in a world where wheat and weeds are always mixed together.

Amen.

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