

Weeding Time?

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Matthew 13:24-30

A Fred Craddock story: “When we lived in Columbia, Tennessee, I had a friend who was the pastor of the largest church in town. In many ways he was a very successful minister, except that his church was full of problems. Whatever happened in that church, whatever anybody said or did, there was always a big problem...at least, that’s how my friend reported it to me. He was sick and tired of it. I saw him downtown one day and said, ‘How’s it going?’

“ ‘Terrible,’ he said. ‘I’m thinking of quitting the ministry.’

“ ‘Aw, you’re not going to quit.’

“ ‘Well, why not?’

“ ‘Because you don’t really want to quit,’ I said.

“ ‘You know what I’m going to do?’ he replied. ‘I’m going to buy a little piece of land over in Arkansas in a rice field, and I’m going to build my own church. There’s going to be a study where I can do my work, and the church will have a beautiful tall spire, and that will be it. No sanctuary, no Sunday school rooms, no fellowship hall, and no church members! Just me and God.’” There are days...there are days, when that sounds tempting indeed!

Reminds me of another church-related story shared by a veteran pastor: “I have recently heard from a young man, who years ago was in one of my church youth programs, and who now is serving as pastor of his first church. Here is some of what he wrote: ‘I really feel called by God to preach the Gospel, to care for the sick and dying, to witness to the love of Christ. But I am beginning to have doubts about my vocation as a pastor. I work with some really good people, but many of them are also very difficult. The arguments at church meetings are getting to me, the criticism, the factions in the congregation. The church close up day-in-day-out is very different than the church at a distance. The real church, as opposed to the ideal church, at times can be a real pain.’”

Here is the church, here is the steeple, but what am I going to do about all of these people? Of course, neither of these stories has anything to do with our church, which, like Mary Poppins, is practically perfect in every way. And yet, not only in the church, but also in our workplace, our schools, our relationships, our families, it seems we have to deal with so many difficult and challenging people. Why can’t everyone be kind and understanding and gentle and loving...well, like me?

There are those times when I wish God had given me the ability to judge and punish others for all their shortcomings, for all the things about them that drive me crazy – such as driving thirty miles an hour down 116 from Sebastopol to Cotati when I am in a hurry! I can see so clearly what is wrong with everyone else. But instead, what I get is...well, what I get, what we all get, is something like our text for today – the parable of the wheat and the weeds, or what could just as easily be named the parable of the of the conscientious servants and the irresponsible master.

As Jesus tells the story, a man sowed good seed in his field. We learn later it was wheat. But then when everyone was asleep, somebody – an enemy – came and sowed weeds in the wheat field. Now there is one you don’t hear every day. Having trouble with a neighbor –his dog barks all night, he has five broken down cars in his driveway. Some night go over and sow crabgrass seeds on his lawn. But back to the parable. In time it becomes easy to see that weeds are growing in the midst of the wheat. The servants come and say to the landowner, “Look at all those weeds growing with the wheat. Do you want us to go and pull out the weeds?” It seems a reasonable request. The weeds can’t be doing the wheat much good. Who doesn’t weed their garden? Who doesn’t want to get rid of weeds?

Let’s root out the undesirables, let’s get rid of the troublemakers, let’s make sure we surround ourselves only with good and reasonable and acceptable people like us. I wonder how much of the bitter debate over immigration is really about getting rid of the unwanted weeds. Put those immigrant kids on a plane and send them back to where they belong! Who cares what happens to them? They aren’t us. It happens in the church – maybe that family would be happier if they found another church. This just isn’t the church for them. I wonder if the bitter divisiveness in Congress is really about people defining who is wheat and who is a weed, who is ideologically pure and who isn’t, who is like me and who isn’t; perhaps even some of the recent bitterness in our town has arisen from an effort by some to define others as undesirable weeds. We like to get rid of the weeds.

Recall a classic “Peanuts” comic strip: Linus comes up to Lucy and says, “Look at this cartoon, Lucy, and tell me if you think it’s funny.”

“Who drew it?” she asks.

"I drew it," Linus responds.

"Then I don't think it's funny!"

As he walks away, rejected cartoon in his hand, Linus grumbles, "Big sisters are the crab grass in the lawn of life."

For him, Lucy is a hindrance, a sore spot, an undesirable problem that keeps him from being what he would like to be, doing what he would like to do. She is always there to frustrate him and get in the way. I suspect each of us can think of a person or persons who always seems to be the crabgrass in the lawn of our lives. It can be so easy to see who is wheat and who is a weed, and yes, I suppose it is a natural impulse to want to pull out the weeds, get rid of the weeds. And it would seem that in our time there are any number of individuals and groups out there today who are dedicated to doing just that – defining who is "them" and who is "us." – weeds or wheat?

But then we come to the difficult part of the parable. I once heard it said that Jesus' parables subvert the received world in order to offer an alternative world. Parables entice us into their world in order to open us to possibilities we would not have envisioned without the parable. I think that is precisely what happens when the master speaks. "Leave the weeds alone," he says. "Don't pick them. Just let them grow with the wheat." What? Are you crazy? Leave the weeds in the field? What kind of a farmer are you? We need to take a stand; need to draw a line. We need to say who is in and who is out; who can stay and who must go. Leave the weeds alone. Why?

And the landowner says, "Because you will do more harm than good. You think you know weeds from wheat, but do you really? When you zealously begin pulling out the weeds, you will inevitably get some of the wheat. Let them grow together. The harvest will come soon enough, and believe it or not, it will be a good harvest." He opens the servants to other possibilities they had never before considered. Again, that's what a parable does.

A pastor writes, "I do not know a weed from wheat. I do not know a weed from a flower. I get out my shovel and trimmer, ready to assault this intrusive bunch of weeds, and my wife comes running out, saying 'Wait, wait, wait!' Then that night at the dinner table, there is that 'weed' in a vase in the center of the table. It sure looked like a weed; I thought it was a weed. I do not know a weed from a flower and every church I have known that tried to weed the garden made horrible, horrible mistakes." Again, that surely is one message of this parable. Be very careful in your judgment of who is a weed and who isn't. Because we may not have the wisdom really to know. The one we treat as a useless and intrusive weed today, may blossom into a beautiful flower tomorrow. What are we losing when we begin dividing the world into wheat and weeds? How easy it is to treat each other in such a way that we leave no room for God's amazing, transforming grace. Turn us loose with our machetes and there is no telling what we will chop down and what we spare. We may be left with a pile of ruined wheat."

And speaking of God, what might this parable be saying about God? I believe Jesus is telling us that, when all is said and done, God is in charge and God's will will be done. Once again we learn that it really is not all up to us. Perhaps we do not have to be quite so quick to judge, for a final judgment isn't ours to make. We can be patient, we can be understanding, we can be confident because, again, God really is in charge and will bring about a good harvest in God's own time. Do not despair. And never forget, when you are dealing with God, what can look like a weed today can very well be wheat tomorrow. Sometimes we just need to have to good sense to listen to the landowner, who does not seem to share our appetite for a pure crop, a neat field, an efficient operation and who seems to be far more interested in growth and transformation than perfection. And he does, after all, own the field."

Now I hope it is clear that this parable does not say that we should just sit idly by and do nothing in the face of evil and injustice, suffering and poverty. It is not saying that we should quit caring and sit on the sidelines of life. But it does say that the ultimate victory of the Kingdom of Heaven does not depend on a world, or individuals, of stainless purity and perfection, which really is good news for all of us.

As I was working on this sermon, the words of one of my favorite theologians, Mr. Rogers, kept running through my head: "Have you ever noticed that the very same people who are bad sometimes are the very same people who are good sometimes?" God knows this and God can work with it. And I suppose that is the great challenge of being in the church, in relationships, indeed of being human... to look upon people through the eyes of a loving God instead of from our own limited, judgmental, narrow, impatient human perspective; to be alert to what our Lord is doing in our midst, watching for the growth of the Kingdom and faithfully participating in God's ongoing work in the world, always with the knowledge and assurance that, finally, evil and suffering will not have the last word and that nothing can destroy the good wheat God has planted. We can work for and await God's good harvest with confident and hopeful hearts.