

“Weeding the Way”

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 11

Wisdom 12:13,16-19; Romans 8:12-25;

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

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From the Pulpit

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A baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 23, 2017, 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Proper 11, dedicated to my friend and colleague Rabbi Michael Ungar, to Don and Kate Erickson, to Frank Hussey and family and to Brenda Childs who was baptized July 18 in our sanctuary and Miles William Sholl on his baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

*“Weeding the Way” **

Wisdom 12:13,16-19; Romans 8:12-25;

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

We pick up today where we left off last Sunday. By that I mean the scene is the same as last week’s gospel. Jesus is still out by the seaside talking to the same people he was talking to about the parable of the Sower. He tells a continuing planting parable – this time - The Parable of the Weeds. As the story continues, the field is planted, and inexplicably, there are all sorts of weeds growing among the grain. We pick-up the story where the servants are asking the master about how they should pull the weeds from the grain. They want to know how they should “weed the way.”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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We begin in the weeds... and the grain. The parable tells us the seeds of the grain have been planted and now the weeds of the field are intermingling with the healthy grain. SO, how do deal with growing weeds when mixed so closely with growing grain? Great question. Great parable.

One farmer I read refers to these weeds as “cheat grass.” Cheat Grass” resembles grain, except it’s inedible for people and gives little sustenance to livestock. But you can’t easily see the difference between it and grain until it starts to blossom and grow its seed. By then it has developed a root system that is much more extensive and stronger than wheat. That’s just one problem. The other problem (that all the first century farmers among us know) is that the seeds in the fields of Jesus’ time were “broadcast” not planted in rows. The seeds were thrown across the fertile ground. Remember the parable of the sower? It is not only what is planted and growing – but how it was planted and growing. You couldn’t walk the rows and pick the weeds when the seeds had been cast broadly.

All the servants see are weeds. Invasive weeds, taking up the soil and nutrients and water! Bad thing, we must do something! Just like everybody else, they see a problem, they get anxious about it, and jump to a solution.

The farmer, however, looks with the eye of experience and wisdom. Yes, there are weeds. But, there is also a crop of grain growing. The weeds are going to reduce his yield, there is no doubt. But if these weeds are pulled up now, the grain will be removed at a greater rate than the weeds, and the yield will go down to zero. During this cycle, the number of weeds is the number of weeds, leaving them won't result in more, so leave them. We will get the wheat that ripens—we will deal with the weeds when there is wheat to harvest. The fruit of the wheat field will nourish people, provide bread, be sold to supply for the needs of the farmer's household. A superabundance of weeds is only one of the ordinary calamities that typically face farmers; that make a situation that promises easy abundance into difficulty and privation. The farmer waits and judges the ripeness of the wheat. At the right time, the servants will pull the weeds and separate them from the nourishing crop. There is a big bonfire, getting rid of the nuisance and the waste. Then the remaining wheat is gathered—and there is food for all.

So here we are – in the middle of the 15th largest city in the United States, 2000 years later, asking “**why is this** (as Jesus says) **like the Kingdom of Heaven?**” **Why?**

Let’s step into the field of our imagination for a minute.

First, we have to agree weeds in wheat is a REAL-WORLD PROBLEM. This is not a pie-in-the-sky parable. St. Matthew is famous for pointing out “real life” issues and real-world problems. In this real-world situation—we want to see and hope to see a beautiful, uniform field of wheat, growing perfectly, moving from green in the springtime, to golden at harvest—but what we get is a field disrupted by weeds and other occurrences, that are just not ideal. Isn’t that just like life? When was the last time your perfect image of “wheat fields waving” failed to include weeds? Or in other words, have you walked through your daily life without any “weeds” recently?

In his beautiful “real world” commentary on Matthew called *Life Together*, 20th Century Christian martyr and saint, and resistor of Hitler’s Nazi Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that Jesus is really talking about life in Christian community. In the midst of Hitler’s rise to power, Bonhoeffer writes about what it means to be Christian and live in Christian community.

*Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality. Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. **But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams.***

“God's grace speedily shatters such dreams...” In other words, God's grace is the gift of God that our community is filled with imperfect people – people definitely in need of God's mercy. And God's grace is the gift of God that our overly perfect expectations are shattered, leaving the real community in its place. And the Kingdom of God happens in the real world, a world with difficulties and disappointments. And indeed, some of those things that happen are evil, or are the result of evil.

So, we can't just say that whatever happens is fine, or certainly not that it is the will of God. We must stand up to evil for the sake of the good of others. **But**, we ALSO don't go around weeding out imperfections, as if every annoyance or imperfection was evil. Some of us are too ready and too hyped-up about being the “Weeders of the Way” instead of being focused on and following “the Leader of the Way.” We don't want to destroy the good grain while we go after the

weeds. That is completely counter-productive whether we are harvesting wheat or growing a community of faith.

We can easily become like the anxious servants all worked up about the weeds. I get that. This is understandable – because the weeds were going to reduce the yield and make the servants look like they weren't doing their job properly. But acting on anxiety (whether in fields or in Christian Community) can bring utter disaster, resulting in a long winter with little or no food available. I have witnessed people weeding the way and destroying the fragile yet sustaining grain in the process.

We are all called to live with imperfection and disappointment as the community grows and shares in God's love. And when REAL evil—that is to say those forces that hurt and destroy the children of God through selfishness, narcissism, fear or hatred—when THIS evil afflicts such a community, the LOVE of that community gives it the courage and resilience to respond and repel the evil and to be a source of life for God's children.

Speaking of anxious community, I am not convinced that the ending of this parable lesson, with its apocalyptic allegory, fits with Jesus' original story. I find it more than annoying that the framers of our lectionary left out the two intervening

parables so that the interpretation naively appears to be a part of the story. In the Gospel of Matthew, the story of the weeds is immediately followed by the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Yeast. These are affected by the end commentary in Matthew 13:36-43 as well.

In the last part of today's passage, it is crucial to note that the party by the seaside breaks up and Jesus goes into the house with his disciples where they ask for more explanation. **That literary break is very important.** We move from the public ministry of Jesus to the organized teaching of the disciples—that is to say, the church of Matthew's day. It's like the talk we deliver outside in the park as opposed to the talk around the table with the Deacons.

Let's be clear about something – Matthew's Gospel sees the problematic weeds as evil people – reflecting the intense conflicts of the church in the last decades of the first century. But still, note this: the ambiguity is the same. It is not up to the disciples or the children of the kingdom to decide and separate the weeds and the wheat—it is angels that do the separating between good and evil at the end of the age. Until then we grow together – the grain and the weeds. As for the consequences of evil being a furnace of fire with weeping and gnashing of teeth... if you claim the right to be truly and unrepentantly evil, hurting and destroying the children of

God... well ... you take your chances, don't you? Good luck surviving the fire that you create when destroying God's beloved community.

In the end, this parable is not about punishment or destruction. It is about the challenge of life in the real world. **Life in Christ is life lived as life in hope.** As we live and grow in Christ, we are called to be a community that shares life and finds life in the mercy that God has for each of us – and for all of God's children.

St. Paul addresses this in Romans 8 today:

When we cry, "Abba! Father!" It is that Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him.

That reference, to "Abba" may in fact be the earliest reference we have to the Lord's Prayer—the prayer Jesus gave his disciples—we are disciples in being God's children: *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."* Forgive us our "Weeds" as we forgive the "Weeds" growing among us and working against the grain. Paul did not address idyllic and perfect Christian communities. He didn't know any. He wrote to churches who experienced conflict or suffering. He sought to bring them hope. With that in mind, he continues:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

On this day is which we celebrate the addition of Miles William Sholl to our community of faith – a day in which he has said, “Yes to God and Jesus,” we must obsess about weeding the way. We must focus on the grain that is growing and follow our leader. We would be wise to follow the example of our five-year-old baptizand and say, “Yes to God and Jesus.” In Paul’s words, we are all God’s adopted people gathered here – adopted into our faith in Christ. Not one of us was born into this faith. All of us chose to follow and were claimed by Christ in the process. Our hope is in the divine reality of a community gathered in diversity and imperfection – all the while discovering God’s great mercy and grace as we walk together. So, let us weed out the junk from our own spirits and souls and allow God to work the wonder of merciful and graceful growth in us. Amen.

*(Thanks go to Fr. Drew Kadel, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Roslyn, NY, for his reflections found in *Observations*, 2017).

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