

Sermon on Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2020  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ...

For any of you that have lived on a farm, or have a garden or a lawn (no matter what size), one thing you never want to see or hear about is a problem with *weeds*. Those of us who tend our gardens or lawns probably spend more time outside digging up weeds or trying to prevent their existence, than the time we spend planting, nurturing or tending our favored vegetables or flowers! That's just a guess. The alternative may be a natural, prairie-grass yard, or a garden that is overgrown. Even if you don't have a lawn service to take care of your lawn, just think of all that people do to get rid of weeds! There is crabgrass preventer, which you spread on the lawn in spring before crabgrass seeds can germinate – but still, you will likely end up with a lawn full of crabgrass. You can spread weedkiller, but you still can end up with weeds that seem to sprout overnight. If you don't like dandelions you can dig them out by hand with a knife, one by one. In the garden, you need to use a hoe or pull the weeds by hand, to keep them from taking over the garden from the vegetables or flowers you prefer. It can seem that every gardener's life is a daily battle with weeds versus flowers – evil versus good, if you look at life that way. But what if weeds are not the enemy? Maybe God is offering us a better way, if you think about it differently, and realize that God has created all things, the weeds along with the flowers, and means for all of us to co-exist in the same garden. What if we find that some weeds have their use? Hmm..

Last Sunday we heard a favorite parable of Jesus about the Sower and the Seed. In that story, the only seeds that were sown were good seeds – grains of wheat we assume. The goal of the sower was to get enough good seeds into good soil, to be nurtured by the sun and the rain, and not lose too many to the birds or other critters, or fall on rocky ground or on the path where people walked, so that they would not grow. Translation: the seeds are the Word of God sown – or spoken – among human beings, to give us abundant life. So this parable's lesson for us is an invitation to become like good soil, so that God's Word will grow and bear abundant fruit in us, good works of loving service to God and neighbor.

Today's parable is also about farming, but much more tricky, because it is also about the existence of both good and evil. How do the weeds show up overnight after the sower planted good seeds in the ground? Had someone mixed bad seeds with the good back at the seed factory, like what happened to my next-door neighbor some years back? Who planted the weeds among the wheat, while everyone was sleeping? That one is called the "enemy" in the parable. And what

did the weeds represent, that spoiled the growing crop? They were plants that would not bear any fruit, who would choke the life out of the wheat. But when the workers wanted to remove the weeds immediately and bundle them up for burning, the owner said no, but to wait until the harvest. What did THAT mean?

So in Matthew's gospel, Jesus explained the meaning to the disciples, after the crowds had left. The sower of the good seed was the Son of Man (Jesus, according to Matthew). The field was the world, the enemy who planted the weeds was the devil, and the weeds were the devil's children. At the end of the age, the angels would reap the harvest, and collect the weeds to be burned. So the parable is really about the last days, about judgment for the evildoers and how the righteous will shine in the kingdom of God. So it was like a warning of the apocalypse, and the seriousness of listening and following God's Word – let those with ears, listen!

Now, this explanation makes me nervous, and many of us uncomfortable. This isn't the sweet, comforting Jesus who invites us to come to him with all our burdens. Maybe it's Matthew's interpretation of the parable, and not Jesus' words at all! Because a lot of mischief has been sown in the church with this parable over the centuries, with church "insiders" calling themselves children of God and "outsiders" or those with whom they disagreed "weeds" or "children of the devil" who should be cast out and be burned. Or saying some righteous ones will "shine like the sun" and some will be thrown into the fiery furnace with weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not a pleasant image for the church. On the other hand, it does tell us to take seriously the teaching that there will be an ultimate judgment about good and evil in the end. But the good news here is that Jesus told his disciples – and teaches us – that God is the judge and we are not. Jesus tells his followers to wait, and not be so anxious to identify the weeds and remove them for burning. Yes, there is good and evil in this world, but let the weeds grow along with the wheat, and wait until the harvest to see what is the result with every person's life. Even the weed is redeemable! Leave the harvest and the judgment to God. Could it be that Jesus, who came to "seek and save the lost", came to bring life to the weeds as well as the wheat? So, let's wait and see. In the meantime, love your enemy as well as your friend! That's what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount!

So what could this parable mean for us today? God knows we are aware of a lot of good and evil in this world – we see it every day, thanks to technology that shows us sin and good around the globe, as well as what we witness with our own eyes. Since the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on Memorial Day, we have seen the resulting peaceful protests turn into rioting and looting, even the burning down of a police precinct station. For protest can turn into rage, chaos and destruction if we are left to ourselves, without justice or reconciliation. We have also seen people trying to keep their communities together, cleaning up

the mess, feeding each other, and seeking to rebuild with a new kind of community policing that cares for and protects everyone, in the midst of a global pandemic which keeps us separated. We have seen a lot of burning and rioting, protests against police brutality and systemic racism in all our institutions (including the church), and we have seen people call one another out for being “racists” or “socialists”, “faithful followers of Jesus” or “fascist fear-mongers” causing trouble – are these the “wheat or the weeds” controversies of today? We see the divisions and strife every day, and now we see evidence of federal agents in camouflage taking protesters off the streets of Portland, acting like imperial storm troopers trying to identify and remove the “weeds” infiltrating peaceful protests – causing even more stress by doing so. We also see many thousands who are dying from COVID-19 in America, and the millions being infected, because of the lack of national leadership against this pandemic, and how our leaders are making the divisions worse – even over wearing masks! We are all getting so tired of the daily divisions and the anxiety – we can hardly wait for this election year to be over - but wonder if we will survive it!

Honestly, I didn’t know where to go with this sermon until we heard of the deaths last night of Representative John Lewis and Reverend C.T. Vivian, two bright lights for Civil Rights since the darkest days of violent racial segregation in this country. Most of us know John Lewis’s story well; C.T. Vivian was a pastor who organized bus boycotts and Freedom Riders busrides through the South, seeking voting rights and an end to Jim Crow segregation. I met him in the mid-1990s when he came to preach at the St. Paul Cathedral for a Martin Luther King worship service, soon after I came to Redeemer. Their life-long witness for justice and human rights for everyone gave me some insight into how to apply today’s parables from scripture to our lives today! For these are two African American men who were born in the time of Jim Crow laws that sought to dehumanize them, who found hope and guidance from the scriptures – from prophets like Isaiah to the teachings of Jesus. To them the gospel shines God’s light of truth on every situation, on every leader and institution, bringing the hope of God’s justice, judgment and reconciliation to every human being. They, and other leaders like them, saw the work of seeking justice for all in an America that has so long been segregated and unjust for too many, as being lifetime work to be passed on to new generations. Like the battle against sin and death, the work of justice for all and the promise of abundant life for every human being is constant. The struggle between good and evil within and among human beings goes on daily, like that between the weeds and the wheat!

It would be easy to fall into despair because you and I cannot just “fix this” systemic problem of racism, or that of poverty, or inequality across race or gender. It’s not like pulling weeds out of a garden! For it’s really a problem of sin within

each of us, resulting from human greed, our lust for power and wealth, the jealousy, envy and hatred which creep into our relationships as we lose our way with each other. But John Lewis, who had every reason to despair from all the sufferings, arrests, beatings and trouble he went through as a Civil Rights leader, and on that Edmund Pettis bridge in 1965, through leading investigations in Congress into the separations of immigrant children from their parents a half-century later, shared these hopeful words on Twitter in 2018:

***“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”*** Those are inspiring words to me. Like scripture, “they’ll preach!”

So, brothers and sisters, here’s my conclusion. Do not despair about how much we have fallen short of our ideals in America or in the Church. For this has always been the case. How often do we who follow Jesus live up to the Sermon on the Mount? America was born in a lofty Declaration of Independence for white, male landowners, but less than 100 years later, fought a Civil War with itself. Facing falsehoods with the truth, sin and evil with faith and goodness, have always been our struggle as children of God – which we all are! In the end, there will be a judgment – by God – which sounds inviting to those who are suffering unjustly now, but terrifying perhaps, to those doing or speaking evil, if they are actually listening or paying attention. (Maybe that is why evil-doers fight so hard!) But as for you and me, don’t be too hasty to judge. We cannot know how everything – or every person – will turn out. Fight for justice, mercy and loving-kindness, but don’t take judgment into your own hands. Because we have seen far too much of that! Your adversaries are not “weeds for burning.”

A long time ago John Lewis studied in seminary, which is why so much of what he said sounds like scripture, or is based on scriptural themes or the words of Jesus! In his memoir from 2017, he said: ***“Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.”*** You could say the same about faith, or salvation, or the Church! And like Jesus said to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, John Lewis tells those of us who carry on the fight for freedom and faith: ***“You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone – any person or any force – dampen, dim or diminish your light. Study the path of others to make your way easier and more abundant.”*** “Let anyone with ears, listen!” Amen.