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“Weeds” July 18, 2021

Matthew 13:24-30
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As a general rule, I don't spend enough time taking care of our flowerbeds. Watering hasn't been an issue lately, but there are other things to care for, like dead-heading the annuals and keeping the herbs trimmed. But one thing no gardener can afford to neglect is pulling weeds. We're in the throes of summer, which means a tiny weed overlooked today will be a monster by the end of the week. Jenn is better at keeping up than I am, but we both have been pretty busy with family and work schedules lately. A quick inspection yesterday revealed one or two record-setting thistles growing among the daylilies. Those things are a pain – literally. But one weed is like my archenemy, more than thistles and crabgrass and clover combined. It's called “hairy bittercress.” It starts out as a little bunch of tiny green leaves (which are apparently edible, though I've never tried). Next come little white flowers (at this stage they're almost cute). But watch out, because next come the long, gossamer stalks on which the seeds grow. Even the slightest contact will cause those suckers to explode, projecting seeds up to three feet or more in every direction. And once happens, forget it. You'll never get rid of them.

There's speculation among botanists and biblical scholars alike that Jesus had in mind a weed even more nefarious when he told the parable in our Gospel Lesson for today. Bearded darnel, scientific name *lolium temulentum*, is a cultivar of ryegrass that is sometimes called “cheat” because of how closely it resembles wheat. The seeds can sometimes find their way into batches of wheat seed, leading to a crop infiltrated by this hard-to-detect weed that can choke out other grain and end up mixed in with the harvest. The worst part is that the seeds are hallucinogenic. In large quantities or high concentration, they can even be toxic enough to cause death. And you thought the carbs would only kill your diet!

In the story Jesus told, a man went out and sowed a field of wheat. He used good seed and all was well. But after dark, when he and his household were asleep, an old enemy decided to pull a dirty trick. He came and planted weeds in the same rows as the wheat. In time, the plants began to sprout – but so did the weeds. The workers in the field reported this to the owner. “Didn't you plant good seed? There are weeds growing alongside the wheat!”

“An enemy has done this,” the man deduced. “He's trying to destroy my crop.”

The workers thought perhaps they should pull the weeds before they grew tall and robbed the wheat of valuable water and nutrients. “No,” the owner said. “If you do, you might pull up the good plants along with the weeds. Let it grow. At harvest time, we'll cut it all and separate out the weeds for burning, storing the wheat in the barn.”

It's pretty clear that Jesus wasn't just giving a lesson in horticulture, but was using an agricultural example to make a spiritual point. Having a field overrun with weeds would be a real problem, threatening the crop and diminishing the yield needed for food or to be sold at market. It wasn't hard to imagine how an act of sabotage could have disastrous consequences.

The power of Jesus's parables lies in their simplicity. The stories are brief, providing only enough detail to communicate what he intended. And he let them speak for themselves, avoiding interjectory explanations and concluding morals. But the details he *did* include are important and worth noting. I'm struck by four specific details in this parable:

1. The seed is pure. It was carefully selected and planted by the owner.
2. Weeds were sown among the wheat by an enemy.
3. Eradicating the weeds would mean destroying the plants, as well.
4. The weeds will be separated from the grain at harvest.

We should exercise caution in treating parables like allegories, in which each of the details represents something or someone in real life. That can lead to narrow or misleading interpretation. Still, it seems apparent here that Jesus is

making a point about faith and receptivity to his teaching. If the message is pure, then why are there so many “weeds” among the “good plants?” Because an enemy has planted bad seeds among the good.

We may be tempted at this juncture to assume this is a parable about the challenges of faithful people living in a secular world, measuring the good, church-going folks against the worldly, unfaithful masses. Not so fast. Unlike the parable of the soils, next week’s topic, where the seed falls indiscriminately and grows accordingly, the setting of this parable is a carefully selected and intentionally planted field. Jesus isn’t talking about the world at large. *He’s talking about the church.* Though the Church is to be the earthly representation of God’s heavenly realm, that’s a goal we fall short of achieving with startling regularity.

Together, we are called to a Holy Communion, but that doesn’t mean we’re a communion of the holy. In fact, Augustine spoke of the Church as a *corpus permixtum* – a “mixed body” of both saints and sinners. My step-grandmother used to say that she wasn’t interested in going to church, because it was “full of hypocrites.” And she was right, inasmuch as the church is made up of people, and any gathering of people exhibits hypocrisy, selfishness, arrogance, and a host of other shortcomings. But it is also a community of fidelity, compassion, humility, and other noble traits. Author Lillian Daniel says anyone can find God in a sunset; the remarkable thing is finding God in a community of people just as messed up as we are. Be honest – haven’t you sometimes wondered how a group of people with so much love for Jesus and so much capacity to do good can also be populated by so many people who drive you nuts?

Of course, I think Jesus was talking about something deeper than idiosyncrasies or little annoyances. Unfortunately, we know all-too-well the capacity of the capital-c-Church to do tremendous harm, even to commit evil. Scandals have rocked the institutional church and its leaders, from fiscal malfeasance to child abuse to harassment and worse. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that *individuals within the Church* are to blame, though institutional inaction and coverups have often compounded the harm. No wonder so many have questioned the need for the church in their lives at all.

The truth is that the weeds of sin are as likely to be found inside the church as outside it. Sometimes they may even be worse, because a moral failure by a Christian individual or community may reflect on the moral trustworthiness of the Christian faith or of Jesus himself.

How can this be? We know the seed is pure. The Word of God is the very foundation of our faith. While we don’t insist that it is inerrant or infallible, we do understand it as authoritative and binding on the relationship between ourselves and God. The one who sowed the seed can be trusted – Christ, who is the unmitigated, living Word of God, imparts to us the words of life. Clearly, an enemy has done this. Whether or not we personify it, evil is present in our world. It is a constant threat. And sin is always at our doorstep.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his exposé of the Soviet prison system, wrote: “the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” If that’s true, and I believe it is, then it isn’t just faith communities that are *corpora permixta*, but each of us. We are *all* a mix of good and evil, saint and sinner. Getting rid of those who are bad would require doing away with the good, as well. As Solzhenitsyn went on, “And who is willing to destroy a piece of (their) own heart?”¹ It’s not as simple as identifying the bad guys by the color of their hats.

As I read the parable of the weeds, three main points resonate with me. First, *the servants are not qualified to separate the weeds from the grain.* The owner instructs them *not* to assume responsibility for eliminating the weeds; *that’s not their job.* In their zeal to be helpful, they may end up doing more harm than good. Instead, he directs them to wait until the harvest, when it will be fully apparent what is weed and what is good grain. If we are meant to understand ourselves as the servants, carrying on the legacy of the disciples, then we would be wise to attend to his warning.

That’s not to downplay the negative influence of sin in ourselves, in our churches, or in our communities. This is not a lesson promoting moral relativity. There is good seed and there is seed sown by an enemy, not ambiguous seed sown by an unknown but benign actor. There is valuable grain and there are weeds, not somewhat less desirable plants whose value is yet to be understood or appreciated. At the end, the weeds will be discarded and the grain kept. Though we know that the line between good and bad isn’t always as clear as stories suggest, there is still a distinction. It’s not “anything goes.” This, then, is not a question of right and wrong, but of who is qualified to make that determination.

Second, *God is more patient than we are.* We want to settle the score, eliminate the competition, set the record straight. But God is a God of grace. “Let them both grow side by side until the harvest.” It’s hard for us to tell the

¹ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago*. Part 1. New York: Harper Collins (1973).

difference between what will turn out to be good and what will not. But that's not true for God. God knows who we are and what we will be. Yet God is willing to wait. That suggests that even what appears not to be worthy now may yet have value in reign of God. The people that annoy us, the people that hurt us, the people we are willing to write off or cast aside, might still be redeemed. And that also means that no matter how far we may stray, *we also may yet be redeemed*. God's grace is greater than our judgment or our limitations.

Third, *if weeding out the bad from the good isn't our job, then we should focus our attention on what is our job*. Far too much energy in the church is spent on boundary marking, trying to decide who is in and who is out when it comes to God's grace. That's energy that could (and should) be reinvested in doing what we are supposed to do: things like loving God and neighbor, caring for one another and the people around us, growing in faith and in relationship to God, modeling the way of Christ, and inviting people to experience new life in him. There are hundreds of things higher on the list of priorities than deciding who is worthy or unworthy of God's love. In fact, judgment isn't even *on* our list.

I haven't done a good job keeping up with pulling the weeds in my yard. But if that serves as an object lesson for me, maybe it's not such a bad thing. I know that evil is on the move and that sin is ever present in the world, and I made a baptismal covenant to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. I will continue to do that as long as I have breath in my body. But resisting evil doesn't require condemnation. It's not up to me to decide who's in and who's out, and I thank God for that because, let's face it, I'm not qualified. And I give thanks that the grace God extends to others is the same grace in which I stand.

The First Letter of John assures us, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." That will become clear in time. In the meantime, let's cultivate our faith and grow in Christ's likeness. And by the grace of God, we may bear fruit worthy of the love God shows us. Thanks be to God. Amen.