

PROPER 11, PENTECOST EIGHT, YEAR A, JULY 23, 2023

There is probably one thing that we can all agree upon and it is that we don't care for weeds. In fact, battling weeds is a multi-billion dollar industry. Whether it is your yard or your garden or a field, the objective is to get rid of weeds. But Jesus tells a parable this morning about a farmer who took a completely different approach. This farmer said, "Let the weeds grow. Don't worry about them. Let's just let it all grow till harvest and then we can sort it out."

Obviously, this is not a common farming strategy and appears to be a terrible plan. But the farmer in Jesus' parable tells his servants to let the weeds alone because sometimes it is impossible to tell the weeds from the wheat. The weeds, or tares, to which Jesus referred were called bearded darnel. In its early stages, "the tares so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. So, if they pulled up the bad weeds they would also uproot some good wheat. The point Jesus makes in the story is that in this world it is often difficult to determine what is wheat and what is weeds. He is saying that in life good exists alongside the bad.

But the problem is deeper than simply identifying what the plant is because sometimes, one person's weed is another person's flower. The question for us is, how do you tell a weed from another plant anyway? Is Queen Ann's Lace or clover a weed or a beneficial plant? We know children love to gather dandelions—to them, they are pretty flowers. For the most part we considered them weeds but there are those that use dandelions to make wine.

So, I think if we are perfectly honest we could say that weeds are simply unwanted plants or plants growing where they are not wanted. And if we take Jesus' parable to be about people, then maybe he has a point after all, that the good and bad coexist but we can't always tell which are the weeds. For years, people tried to kill tomato plants because they were thought to be poisonous weeds. St. John's Wort, found to have all kinds of medicinal properties, was nearly killed off completely by ranchers because it gives cows indigestion. We can't always determine which are wheat and which are weeds—and truth be told isn't this an analogy of human beings.

Martin Luther said that the Christian is at the same time saint and sinner. There is wheat and weeds in all of us. As the old saying goes: "There is so much bad in the best of us, and there is so much good in the worst of us, that it hardly behooves any of us, to speak ill of the rest of us."

A Sunday school teacher once asked her young students if the good people were painted green and the bad people red, what color would you be? One little boy said, "striped." He was right, but so often we don't see it in ourselves. Truth is the line separating good and evil, wheat and weeds, saints and sinners; does not go between us; it goes right through us. None of us is perfect. We know that most of the time. Most of the time, we are decent people, but we all know that our anger, prejudices can get the best of us. So, it's much easier to see the bad in someone else or what we perceive is bad in them which leads us to judge who is in and who is out.

That is why the history of the world and the church, is filled with examples of people believing they alone are the good ones and all those who differ from them are the bad or evil ones. Through the centuries, the church has tried to purify itself, to remove the weeds, with disastrous results.

There were the Crusades in which Christians embarked on a giant weeding mission. In one of the first crusades, Christian knights blew thru an Arab town and killed everyone in sight. In the process they killed many Christians as it never occurred to them that Christians could have brown skin as well as white.

Later, the Inquisition hunted down suspected heretics and burned them at the stake, like weeds. Even in this country, we had the Salem witch trials in which weeds were burned. And we need to remember Roger Williams founded Rhode Island essentially as a place where the weeds could grow unhindered – and in that day, the weeds were Baptists, Catholics, and Quakers.

There is still this desire to straighten things out and clean things up and make sure that weeds are driven off. There are still Christians that threaten LBGTQ+ people and other religious groups. Anti semitism is on the rise because “good” people believe they have the only truth about God. They believe we can’t have weeds growing among the wheat and they know who the weeds are. But isn’t that exactly what Jesus said that we are not to do? To leave the weeds alone and wait until the harvest.

Jesus is telling us to let the wheat and weeds grow together. To separate the wheat from the weeds, the good people from the bad people, the righteous ones from the evil ones; would require us to destroy a piece of ourselves and own hearts. And God does not wish for us to do that. There’s something here that speaks directly to the complexity of the human character. We are a mixture of wheat and weeds, good and bad.

Do you remember the story of Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist, who saved over a thousand Polish Jews from the concentration camps in World War II? One of the people he saved said of him, ‘He was our father, our mother, our only hope. He never let us down.’ Yet many who saw the film Schindler's List were surprised, if not quite put off, by his vices. He was a man prey to all the human vices.

Schindler was certainly no saint. In fact, he was riddled with contradictions. He was unfaithful to his wife and he knew how to enjoy the so-called good life—cigars, drink, and women. He was a Roman Catholic, but only in name. He was also a member of the Nazi party, and his avowed aim was to end the war with two trunks full of money. In the beginning he exploited the Jews as a source of cheap labor.

But then there was the other and better side to him, and in spite of his lapses he always returned to that better side. There was basic goodness in him. As the war went on he became appalled at the horrors of ‘the final solution’ and at considerable personal risk (he was arrested twice), he protected his workers from the death camps.

Schindler was no angel. He was a mere human being, and yes, goodness was in him, but that goodness was seriously flawed. He was both wheat and weeds. The divided nature of Schindler, and the divided nature of each of us, is something this parable discloses. All of us are wheat and weeds—at one and the same time both sinner and righteous. The great psychologist, Carl Jung, talked about our personalities having a ‘shadow’ side which we must somehow learn to recognize and befriend. However you want to express it, we cannot escape the truth that ‘evil’ isn’t all about what’s outside ourselves. The ‘weeds’ of this parable are part of us.

So this parable asks us to look at what God sees—a call to see reality as it is, rather than what we construct by our prejudices and particular outlook? It’s hard to tell

wheat from weeds—that's the problem. This parable tells the story that we may not be the best judge of what is 'good' or 'evil' either in ourselves or in others.

It also tells us that God creates out of love and for love. There is hope for all of us. This parable speaks to us of God's patience and how God does not give up on anyone, and neither should we.

In the final analysis, today's message is about the great promise of God's infinite love, compassion and grace and trusting in God's love to overcome evil. The survival of good does not ultimately depend upon our truths or our zeal in stamping out what we think is bad. Rather, it depends upon our trust in the steadfastness of God's love. Our task, then, is not to judge but to be reconcilers – to bring healing and reconciliation for the church and the world through the practice of unrequited love. So let us take up the task to trust, to believe and to hope in the reality of God's love which does conquer evil once and for all. Amen.