

## LEARN TO LOVE THE WEEDS!

(08/21/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43

“Let both grow together until the harvest.” (Mt. 13:30)

The gospel lesson for this morning is another of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom of heaven--the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, or what the King James Version calls the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares.

A parable, as we have been learning this summer, is a vignette that conveys a certain message. It is different from a lecture. It is more symbolic than conceptual. It is more like myth than history. A myth, a fairy tale, a parable is a story that is not true on the outside, but it is true on the inside. It may or may not be factually true, but it is psychologically and spiritually true.

Despite the way the parables are presented in the gospels, I do not believe that Jesus just stood up in front of a crowd and began to teach in parables. Parables are not particularly effective when they come out of the blue. As a pedagogical device, they are more effectively employed in response to a person’s question.

Sometimes the question that gave rise to the parable is included in the gospel narrative. For example, a lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answers a question with a question: he asks the lawyer what is written in the law. The lawyer says that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus tells the man he is correct.

The lawyer then asks, “And who is my neighbor?” In response, Jesus says, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers.” Jesus does not just get up in front of a crowd or in front of his disciples and tell this story. The story would be much too confusing. He tells the story, the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), in response to a question about neighbors, a question about whom we should regard as a neighbor.

Sometimes, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the initial question is included in the gospel narrative. Sometimes it is not. In those cases where it is not included, I find it helpful to imagine what the original question might have been.

For example, Jesus tells a parable about two men who build their houses. One builds his house on sand; the other builds it on rock. When a storm hits, the house that is built on a foundation of rock survives; the house built on sand is destroyed.

I wonder what question preceded and called forth this parable, this little vignette. Someone may have asked Jesus why some people triumph over adversity while other people are destroyed by it. Someone may have asked Jesus about the essential personality characteristics of resiliency. Someone may have asked Jesus how, in such a turbulent world, we can find a sense

of security. We don't know what the question was, but I suspect there was a question. I also suspect that the question was a question that we would ask Jesus if we had the opportunity.

What question preceded and called forth the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds? Someone may have asked why, if God is all-good and all-powerful, evil exists in the world. The person may have asked why God doesn't just eliminate all Republicans (or Democrats) to make this a better nation. (This last question is unlikely since America technically didn't exist when the question was asked.) We don't know what the question was, but we can assume there was a question. We can also assume that it is a question that we would ask Jesus if we had the opportunity.

In response to the question, whatever it was, Jesus tells the crowd that God is like a farmer. We went down this road several weeks ago when we looked at the Parable of the Sower and the Soil. If you recall, I expressed the opinion that God, as described in that parable, is not a particularly good farmer. God scatters the seed all over the place. He throws it on the well-worn path, on top of rocks, and among thorns. A good farmer would never do this! A good farmer would remove the rocks, till and fertilize the soil, and make sure the emerging plants receive adequate sunshine and water.

As I have said, I realize I am going out on a limb when I criticize God. This is how I feel in relation to today's parable, that I am treading on dangerous ground. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, God, the farmer, sows good seed in his field. When the plants come up, the farmer's servants discover that weeds are interspersed throughout the wheat. They come and tell the farmer. The farmer says, "An enemy has done this."

That's an interesting response. I have a halfway decent lawn around our house. It looks quite good from a distance. If you came up close, however, you would discover that my lawn contains a fair amount of crabgrass.

Let's assume that you were insensitive enough to point out that I have crabgrass in my lawn. I know you're not, but just assume that you were. What would you think if I told you that an enemy did it, that neighbors who don't like me come over by night and scatter crabgrass seed on my lawn. I suspect you would suggest that I go back on my medication!

Once again, not to criticize God, but it seems to me that God's response is a paranoid response. When anything goes wrong, when it doesn't turn out as you planned, blame "the enemy."

Now look at how the farmer responds to his servants. His servants inform him that weeds are interspersed among the wheat. The weeds will draw water and nutrients from the soil. If they grow higher than the wheat, they will prevent the sun from reaching it. The servants ask the farmer if he would like them to remove the weeds. The farmer tells them no, just leave the weeds alone. No self-respecting farmer would do this, particularly if he did not have to do the weeding himself!

What is the message of this parable? To what question or kind of question would Jesus' response be an answer? Some preachers have linked it with the Second Coming or the Great Judgment. Since I am not a great fan of this doctrine, I am much more interested in discovering what Jesus might be telling us about this life, about this life in general, and about our individual life.

First, Jesus may be telling us something about the importance of acceptance. Jesus may be telling us something about the acceptance of life. He may be telling us that life is comprised of opposites: good and bad; light and dark; sunshine and rain; good fortune and bad; pleasure and pain; health and illness; life and death. In addition to the wheat, there are weeds. Jesus may be telling us that we need to accept life as it is, that we need to love it as it is. He may be telling us to let God sort things out if, and when, God feels it is time to do so.

Jesus may be telling us something about the acceptance of other people. As we know, some people are polite, while others are rude. Some are kind, while others are cruel. Some are sensitive, while others are insensitive. Some are members of the correct political party (the one to which I belong), while others are misguided or just plain stupid. Some are like me, while others are different. Jesus may be telling us that we need to accept other people as they are, that we need to love them as they are. He may be telling us to let God sort things out if, and when, God feels it is time to do so.

Finally, Jesus may be telling us something about ourselves, about the importance of self-acceptance, particularly about the importance of what Jung called the integration of our shadow. As we know, we can be compassionate, but we can also be cold and unfeeling. We can be unselfish, but we can also be selfish. We can reach out to others, but we can also withhold. We can be patient, but we are often impatient and angry. We have our strengths, and we have our weaknesses. Jesus may be telling us that we need to accept ourselves as we are, that we need to love ourselves as we are. God will sort things out if, and when, God feels it is time to do so.

In his parabolic response to the unknown question, Jesus may be warning us about the dangers of dualistic thinking. He may be reminding us that it is not always easy to distinguish the wheat from the weeds. The weed that is referred to in the parable is dandelion. It is apparently difficult to distinguish dandelion from wheat until both plants are fully grown.

When I weed my wife's flower gardens, I need her to help me distinguish the weeds from the perennials. It is not always easy to distinguish the flowers from the weeds. When it comes to my lawn, I am not sure why crabgrass falls into the category of a weed. The designation seems to me to be somewhat arbitrary. All I know is that I can get crabgrass to grow in some areas that, for the life of me, I just can't fill in with grass!

We need to be careful. We Christians might believe that we are the wheat, and the Muslims are the weeds. Of course, Muslims might believe that they are the wheat, and we are the weeds that need to be eradicated. We Protestants might think that we are the wheat, and the

Roman Catholics are the weeds. Roman Catholics might think that they are the wheat and non-Catholics of any type are the weeds. Throughout history, we have both tried to eradicate the other. When it comes to personality types, to typology, I might believe that thinking introverts are the wheat and feeling extraverts are the weeds. My wife would tell you that I have it all wrong: that feeling extraverts are the wheat and that people who read a lot, don't particularly enjoy social gatherings, and who don't tend to express feelings or even communicate very much are the weeds. (I think we all know who is right in this debate! By the way, that was a rhetorical question!)

Jesus may be telling us to be careful of this kind of dualistic thinking. It doesn't take a rocket surgeon to realize that there is a subjective dimension to this differentiation, to the categorization of wheat and weeds. If we are not careful, we will think that it is our calling, our divine mission, to designate and then eradicate the weeds. Jesus tells us to leave that to God.

As you know, I am not one to criticize God, but many, many years ago God utilized the very dualistic approach to improving life on earth that Jesus calls us to repudiate. At the time of Noah, God realized that weeds (sinners) were interspersed throughout the wheat (non-sinners); in fact, there seemed to be more weeds than wheat. I suspect this was probably the case since it is so today. So, God gathered the wheat, all the good people in the world together in a boat, Noah, and his family, all eight of them, and killed everyone and everything else on the face of the earth. God assumed that if the weeds were eradicated, only wheat would remain.

As we know, God's approach doesn't work. This is the only place in the Bible where God admits he made a mistake. After the flood, God establishes his covenant with Noah and with all humanity. What God says to Noah is very interesting. As recorded in Genesis 8, God says "in his heart:"

*I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.*

God realizes, somewhat belatedly, that he cannot divide the world into good people and bad people. Everyone has a shadow side. We all have evil in our heart. The evil cannot be eradicated. However, through Jesus, it can be transformed!

Adolf Hitler made the same mistake as God. Hitler wanted to create a master race. Hitler pictured the denizens of this master race as blond-haired, blue-eyed, incredibly neat, and eminently rational Caucasian people from central Europe. That sounds a little subjective (even to someone like me, someone of German heritage who fits this description). Hitler thought that if he could kill off all the weeds: the Jews, gypsies, communists, union organizers, homosexuals, mentally ill, and mentally retarded, and that if he could conquer other countries and bring their way of thinking and living up to speed, he would create a better world.

This response not only did not work; it is evil. In this country, we believe quite the opposite. We in America believe that our strength lies in our diversity, in heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. We built ramps so that the physically challenged will have access to

buildings; we utilize American Sign Language so the hearing impaired will understand a lecture in a college course. We want all children--rich and poor, white and Black, to have proper nutrition, health care, dental care, and access to education. We even want prisoners, hardened criminals, to have the opportunity to experience rehabilitation—except, of course, in Texas.

A man worked very hard on his lawn and his flower gardens. He lay down plastic shields, utilized weed killer, and spent more of his summer evenings weeding than he would have liked. It was all to no avail. The weeds just kept coming.

Finally, he went to a horticulturist at a nearby university. The expert listened patiently to the man's tale of woe. At the end of the discourse, the man asked the expert for his advice concerning the weeds. After a short pause, the horticulturist replied, "I suggest that you learn to love them."

In response to some question, Jesus tells the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. The question may have been about life. It may have been about the kind of people that populate this world. The questioner may have asked why there are so many annoying persons in his/her church. It may have been why Republicans (or Democrats) are so stupid. But it may have also been about the questioner, him/herself. The questioner may have asked Jesus why, even though he/she knew better, he/she should so consistently and constantly be impatient, angry, selfish, and egocentric. In response, Jesus tells the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds.

Jesus tells us not to get upset about the weeds in life. There are going to be good days and bad, sunshine and rain, times when the market is up and times when the market is down. There are times when we will be healthy and times when we will be ill. Even the weeds, or at least what we call weeds, can play a positive role in our individuation, in shaping our soul. Jesus may be telling us that this life, with its fascinating combination of wheat and weeds, is good! We need to not only accept life as it is, but we need to learn to love it!

Jesus may be telling us that we need to not only accept but also learn to live with the weeds in other people. He asks us to be circumspect, to be cognizant of the subjection dimension of all our dichotomizations. He tells us to be sure to refrain from taking on the divine mission of eradicating what we, from our limited perspective, identify as weeds. That is God's job, not ours! And it seems that God is in no hurry to do this.

Jesus may be telling us that we need to not only accept but learn to love ourselves, even though our daily lives show ample evidence of weeds. And, if we are the least bit self-reflective, we know that they do! He may be telling us that we need to take the same attitude toward ourselves, toward our strengths and weaknesses, our good points and bad, that God takes toward us. As C. G. Jung put it, the goal of individuation is wholeness, not perfection. The wheat and the weeds need to live together!

Jesus may be telling us that we need to learn to love the weeds: the weeds in our society, the weeds in our family members, even the weeds in ourselves. This is the only way that the weeds can be transformed into flowers.

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