

Lectionary 16A 2017, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, July 23, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

What is a weed? Most people I know consider a weed to be a plant growing in a place where it not wanted. A beautiful flower, like Black-Eyed Susans, growing bright orange and yellow, may be lovely in a garden, but invasive and unwanted in a farmer's field of alfalfa. A dandelion produces a colorful flower and its leaves are even edible, and what child doesn't delight in blowing the white puff-balls of seeds into the wind on a late spring day? But to a person whose pride and joy is their perfectly manicured, weed-free lawn, a dandelion is a pest to be avoided and eradicated at all costs.

Weeds may grow where they are not wanted, but they grow where they do because they are well-suited to that particular environment. This particular aspect of weed biology may not be part of Jesus' parable, but it very well could be. We may be frustrated by the weeds in our lives, the physical, spiritual, metaphorical weeds, but they grow as well as they do because they find an environment conducive to their growth. But that's getting a little ahead of myself. Let's return to this well-known parable of the wheat and the weeds told by Jesus which we heard this morning.

The scene painted by Jesus in our gospel readings is very familiar to his listeners, well-versed in 1st century Palestinian farming techniques. The farmer sows the seeds left over from the harvest the year before. Among the young stalks of wheat another plant begins to grow. Our bible translates these as "weeds," the unwanted, invasive, plant. The old King James Bible translated the word as "tares." But the original word denotes a very specific plant, darnel, or sometimes known as cockle, or false wheat. The scientific name, in case you're interested, is *Lolium temulentum*. It's a plant often found in wheat growing areas. Darnel is a plant that, when it first sprouts out of the ground, is almost indistinguishable from the wheat among which it is growing. Like many grasses it has a web-like root structure which intertwines among the roots of the wheat. It's not until the ear of seed emerges that darnel can be distinguished from the wheat. The wheat ears are heavy and bend the stalk downward, while the darnel ears are light and stand upright. At harvest time it's absolutely imperative that the wheat and darnel are separated, because darnel seeds are poisonous, causing severe nausea and a drunk-like stupor, and will ruin the wheat harvest if allowed to intermingle.

While the wheat and darnel are in their growth stage all the 1st century farmer can do is allow the plants to grow together. He could try to pull up the offending weeds, but runs the risk of uprooting his valuable crop. Besides, at this stage of the season, it's often difficult to tell the two apart. Best to wait until the harvest, then by their fruits he shall know them.

At this point the parable seems mostly to be about patience. The servants are anxious about the weeds growing among the wheat, but the farmer tells them to wait until the reapers come at the harvest, then all will be known and the separation can occur. Remember this is a kingdom parable. Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven is like this farmer who planted good seed and then an enemy came and planted bad seed." The kingdom of heaven will grow in the world, but it will always grow with weeds interspersed alongside and intertwined. The kingdom of heaven, as wonderful as it is and will be, will never be free from the influences of evil until the very end, when the harvest is brought into the barns and the weeds are burned for fuel in the fire.

That there will be a harvest is good news. But it's only good news because the harvester is the one whose life is made victorious by death and resurrection. Jesus is the harvester of the kingdom of heaven as well as the one who sows the seeds here and now. His life of humble

service to the poor and those in need is the fruit by which the wheat shall be known from the weeds.

History, however, has often shown the disastrous consequences of trying to root out the weeds from the wheat, in the mistaken belief that it's possible to create and maintain a pure, single species, field. Maybe no more so than in the last century and into the one we now reside. Ethnic cleansings, the subjection of native peoples onto reservations, the persecutions of Christians, or Muslims, or Buddhists, or whatever religious group is hated by another; this is the legacy of trying to hack out the weeds from among the wheat.

But the broad sweep of history also finds expression in the small communities of those who believe they are the wheat of the field. Maybe it's not so much that we try to pull up the weeds, but we often think that we can remain pure and not allow the weeds to begin growing among us in the first place. I will admit that a field of wheat or corn or even sunflowers all growing together in perfect harmony, row upon row of uniform stalks perfectly aligned, has a great appeal. But we can't ever think that's a model for the church community. To present ourselves to the world as a community of uniformity is utter foolishness and completely unrealistic, besides being totally unbiblical. Jesus says the wheat and the weeds will grow up together and they will often be intertwined with one another. We can never expect uniformity and consistency, even in the church. Besides, God will sort it all out in the end. That part really isn't up to us, after all.

Like most portions of the biblical text there are numerous ways of interpreting it. I'd like to suggest another way of looking at this text, something I alluded to at the beginning. In preparation for this sermon, I read a treatise on weeds. It's amazing the kind of thing you can come across when you prepare for a sermon. The author contended that weeds often seem to thrive in areas where they aren't wanted because they are well-adapted to that particular environment. For example, from an ecological perspective a modern day lawn is an un-natural attempt to maintain one species of plant in a particular environment. The problem is nature always gravitates towards diversity and not uniformity. The broad-leaf plantain is a plant that thrives in the kind of environment where lawns are established. As any lawn owner knows the plantain looks out of place with its broad leaves spreading outward covering the fine grass growing upward. From the lawn owner's perspective the plantain is a weed, and must be eradicated with chemically based weed-killers, all of which have broad ecological implications.

Weeds grow where they find a suitable environment. Our lives can be just like that. The weeds are there, and we know that. Sometimes we wish they weren't there. We may even take steps to try to get rid of them. We might even try to hide them, or deny we even have them. The weeds in our lives can be any number of things; but they are all related to the things which distract us from being the kind of person God wants us to be and the mission God puts in front of us. The point is, we can sometimes get so obsessed with trying to suppress or eradicate the weeds in our lives that we forget to tend the whole garden. Jesus is saying to us: be patient. Allow me to sort it out in the end. Trust in my word. You can never get rid of all the weeds in your life. But that's ok, for there will come a time when all the good fruit and all the good grain of your life will be gathered into my barn and the rest will no longer be of any worry.

To be planted in God's garden is a great and wonderful gift. An even greater gift is to know that we are not the gardener, we are not the sower and we are not the one who harvests. Trusting in that word means freedom to do the one thing we are supposed to do: grow. Amen.