

Sermon – 7th Pentecost
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 and Romans 8:18-27
July 19, 2020

“The Problem with Weeds”

Our Lord Jesus, in our lesson today from Matthew, offers some words on what we might call “theological agronomy”, the thorny, or more precisely “weedy” problem of evil asserting place where we suppose it does not belong – it God’s good creation. By referencing the origin and ways of weeds, Jesus is referring to evil’s allies in the public square, and counsels his followers on what to do with those noxious folks in our midst – people who seem content to thumb their noses at God’s good intention for creation - real humans, not theoretical ones who, as English theologian N.T. Wright has written, “*have given their lives and energies to inventing and developing wickedness, profiting from it, luring others into it, and wreaking large-scale human devastation as a result.*”

As some of you may recall from my message last time – I said that stories, particularly humorous ones, if they need to be explained, have already lost their effect. I suggested the same is true for parables so I’m going to largely avoid an explanation of or for evil. “*The parable of the wheat and the weeds*” as this story is called, is paired today with Romans 8:18-27 and it’s a good thing, because the parable our Lord tells in Matthew 13 cannot be understood at all apart from the Apostle Paul’s assertion that nothing happens in this world that “surprises” our Lord. Rather, this “veil of tears”, which creation is sometimes referred as, is in the midst of a thorough reclamation begun with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“*I consider the present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed, for the creation was subjected to futility (frustration) not by its own choice but by the one who subjected it, in hope.*” Now, Paul knew a thing or two about weeds – he watched it multiply 30,60, or 100 times in places he visited– local culture, common human immorality, corrupt government, enraged, offended leaders of other religions, all poked their weedy heads out where Paul preached. Paul knows that weeds do well, sometimes better, in the very conditions that give growth to goodness and charity and humility and kindness. He knows, as we do, that God has in his wisdom seen fit to allow both to emerge – to compete as it were for the soil.

But Paul knows, as our Lord most assuredly does, that there will be a reckoning one day, and that reckoning will be the “*revealing of the sons (children) of God.*” Sad to say, but Christians are not called to grow in clean fields – planted, watered, tended, trimmed, in nice plots of land like the ones that lying resplendent under the sun in so many Brookfield, Elm Grove, Wauwatosa summer days - lush, undisturbed greenness. God knows, indeed has willed, that we grow amidst competition, sometime fierce, and what keeps us going is the promise of Matthew 13. The landowner knows what’s out there in his land, he knows the children of God from the children of this world, and he’ll tend to each according to his word at the proper time.

What Paul says in Romans 8:18-20 amounts to an explanation of Jesus' explanation of the parable of the weeds and the wheat – it helps us understand why our Lord would say something so audacious as that in his creation evil will have a field day too. If, Paul says, a child is a child of the light, a child of God, then they are so only because of their faith in the one who planted faith in them, and then their (our) hanging on to the soil in which we're planted come "weeds" or high water! Hope, which is patient, is what the parable is about – neither it nor its explanation offer a reason much less guidance on what to do about evil or how long we'll have to wait. Hope grows amidst contradiction, even despair, over the way things are instead of how they were intended to be.

Paul and Jesus clearly know that weeds can be prolific, but that does not stop them from saying that the children of God are growing too. Evil competes hard for space and time in this world, it crowds in on us, stands right up and all but convince us the sun no longer sees us and the water of life can't reach us. It forgets, or cares not to confront the inconvenient truth that children of the light grow best when they grow among competition. The children have Christ, and Christ knows a thing or two about competition. As John 1:5 and again 1:9 says, the evil one has never figured out how to combat light when comes from within a person –it can't smother what it can't see - God put it there for a reason – so that evil can't touch it!!!

Nothing about this story suggests sin be ignored, if anything it is a reminder of how close it is to us, how intertwined it is with and in us. But the manner of our confrontation is not to personally "weed it out" but by grace outproduce it. Personally, we struggle against sin every day - it's claim for the space in us called our hearts voracious. Jesus says we must confront it with patience and not get hasty and harsh and try to root it out ourselves lest we get carried away – the Christian church has been sorely tempted by that over time and some of its forays into spiritual agronomy have not been pretty – the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the Creedal Wars in 16th and 17th century Europe that still leave a sour taste about the church in people's mouths on that continent.

Closer to our own lives, it's astounding the agronomy we entertain - how therapists and self-help experts occasionally masquerading as preachers keep churning out books and podcasts that are all but certain to resemble a "better gardening" list of bad traits we need to weed out and the good ones we need to plant from some obscure passage they came across in I Chronicles or the Book of Esther. Yet Christians load them on their Kindles as fast as they come out. Lost in weeds we need to root out is, in many instances I'm afraid, Christ – who if the parable of the wheat and the weeds says anything, is the very life you are rooted in – you dear Christian were what he would not dare harm, no matter what happens in his world, because you were prepared to shine like the sun in the kingdom of His Father, and yours.

Our parable is about a gracious God who wouldn't do anything to harm his children – he knows what is His and what isn't, and he'll preserve you even if it means he'll let the children of the world have their way and wreak no small amount of havoc in the process. Sure, there is a certain amount of exertion in being a Christian – a little groaning is not such a bad thing.

Paul says that is precisely what the Spirit of your forgiver and Lord Jesus is doing this very moment on your behalf. Your Lord knows that this life is not a garden party. Jesus is never testy with us, but he does test us with this story. Alert, reasonable people as we assume, even pride ourselves to be, we probably would say we wouldn't do things this way - we're "weeders" by nature – that is until the tugging we're prone to do on all the sin "out there" creates this nagging feeling that someone is tugging at something "right here" – in us. The Spirit does indeed have way of helping us in our weakness, eh?

So when today, for genuine reasons, you long for God to act, to put the world right, remind yourselves from within yourselves and your own self-examined heart that God has already done so – through the resurrection of Jesus. The sin in us and the wrong all around us knows it had its day, and its over. Confessed, sin will only see the grace of God. Unconfessed, it will see the judgement of God. But confessors...you wait upon that day full of grace not like people wondering if anyone will ever bring to this world a small light, but as people who know the Son is already up, and we're simply waiting for the full brightness of midday to shine. And shine it will. AMEN