

“WEEDS”**Westminster by the Sea Presbyterian****Matthew 13:24-30****January 23, 2022
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Weeds: I never liked them. My mother would send me out in the hundred-degree heat in Kansas City to pull them out of the hard packed clay soil of what passed for flower beds at our house. For ten years, our Daytona Beach beachside yard was nothing but weeds and specialized in sandspurs. Even now with a service regularly supplying weed control and flowerbeds well mulched, weeds fly, crawl and are carried into my yard. I really don't like weeds: they are a thorn in my foot sometimes. Weeds love to grow where they are least wanted.

This parable is about weeds in a farmer's field of grain. The weeds resemble the grain itself, making identification difficult. Interspersed as they are among the good seed, extraction of the weeds will uproot the desired crop as well. Though the servants want to “pull the weeds”, the Master says “No”. Rather he will wait until the harvest, then he will have the good separated from the bad. It is obvious this scripture is not just about a farmer, fields of grain and noxious weeds. This parable lends itself to allegorical interpretation. It is about Jesus, the Master, who casts the good seed. The enemy is the devil who seeks to thwart the work of the Lord. The servants failed to be watchful as instructed but want to make up for their mistake and desire to pull out the weeds at their first appearance. The field can be the world but also the church. The plants can be people, good and bad. The harvest which is the day of the final judgement comes in God's time.

I'm confident that Matthew's Gospel was written to a mixed community. Among the members were differences of opinion, belief and behavior. There were already disagreements and divisions fracturing the community. There were some who were not sharing the load and others who wanted to clean house. There were some who had heard the Word of Jesus but were not doing it and others who were self-righteous in their own performance. There were many who were shocked because they expected the church to be a place of peace, unity and purity but found “weeds” growing within it. In the biblical parables, the servants of the Master often voice the concerns and desires of the audience church: just as Peter is often the spokesperson for the twelve disciples. The servants are shocked that there is bad seed among the good, weeds among the grain. They are shocked that the community is imperfect and the people imperfect. So, they ask the Master, “Do you want us to go and gather them?” They mean “Can we pull them up and get rid of them?”

That's what we would like to do. We'd like to rid the world, the country, the church of all who disagree with us, all who do not measure up to our standards, all who do not see it our way. We “fantasize that everything would be so much better without “them”. Of course, we overlook the log in our own eye, the sin in our own lives and the deficiencies in our own faithfulness when we do that. We focus on others' failures and forget that what the Apostle Paul says to the Galatians (6:1-5) that in situations of judgement “all must test their own work...for all must carry their own loads.”

Matthew is concerned throughout his gospel about the behavior of disciples. In this Gospel, there are repeated calls to “be doers of the Word as well as hearers.” It is in Matthew that we find the Sermon on the Mount with its intensification of God's commandments and the final word to be ‘morally’ perfects even as You Heavenly Father is perfect. This is a call to all disciples. But this gospel is also concerned about judgement that runs amuck. In the same Sermon on the Mount, we read, “Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgement you make, you will be judged.” (7:1) This gospel demands gentleness and caution even when “another member of the church sins against you.” The whole purpose of going to that person is correction and to “regain” your brother or sister. Even if one eventually refuses “to listen to the whole church” the instruction is that the offender to be to you as a “Gentile and a tax collector”. But “Gentiles and tax collectors” for Jesus are not objects of scorn but people to love. They are not to be cast out and made outsiders, which they were when Jesus came but to be treated as one loved of God and welcomed into the Christian community. (17:5-10)

The role of judge belongs to the Lord. A day of judgement will come, but it is not now. While we must make judgements and sometimes to protect others and sometimes prevent destruction of the group, as disciples we are called to practice great patience and caution in “weeding” the Church. Jesus saves his harshest words not

for those who are floundering but the hypocrites and the self-righteous who demand perfection from others or treat the other children of God badly.

There are several reasons we are called to exercise great caution and patience with one another.

One is that we have the innate ability to confuse what we want and what God wants. We are adept at using scripture to support our positions, rather than letting scripture speak in correction and guidance to us. We have minds and hearts that are conditioned by culture, by known norms of good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, so that our ears can become closed and our hearts hardened like the Israelites who would not listen to the prophets and like those who rejected Jesus because he could not possibly be the Messiah. He did not fit their description. The Messiah could not come from Nazareth, wouldn't associate with tax collectors and sinners, and anyone who was hung on a tree was cursed by God. But such judgment was dead wrong!

Rebuking others and deciding who should be in and who must be out is dangerous business in the church. Often good people are identified as bad. More than one innocent has been identified as a witch and many who were faithful got caught up in periods of inquisition. More than a few have left because others judged them harshly or with half the truth. Undoubtedly, when we start pulling up the weeds, the good get uprooted also. We are just not very good at being the judge of our sisters and brothers.

I grew up where dandelions were weeds. Their yellow flowers and puffy seedpods were a horrible nuisance that invaded every yard. We were always spraying and digging them up. Nobody wanted dandelions in their yard. They were the Missouri dollar weed with blooms. Yet, on my very first backpacking trip leading senior highs, we climbed up to the last meadow before timberline. It was early spring, and the stinkweed was still low, and the wildflowers and grasses were a blanket of beauty. One of my cherished pictures is of the Indian paintbrush, the wild iris and the dandelions that inhabited that meadow. It made me wonder if dandelions were only weeds in my eyes. In the mountains, they certainly give glory to their maker.

Another reason is that exercising patience is very important, at least if we believe in the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In most cases we cannot identify between good and bad, particularly when we are all working out our faith in fear and trembling. Sanctification, which is the fancy theological word for holiness or moral perfection, is not a given at conversion but a process of the Christian life, which does not end until death. Some are struggling but not lost. Some are working at it but not there yet. Some are growing and need nurture not judgment. We need to let others have the same opportunity as we do: to grow in faith and not expect them to be already where we have become. Besides, judge too soon and we make false judgements; we uproot the future and block God's grace. Our faith says that people can and do change and that all disciples should be in continuous growth and change. The Christian life of transformation is as Don Meredith used to say in the early days of Monday Night Football: "It ain't over until the fat lady sings."

If Jesus had rooted up the weeds, he would have cut Peter out of the twelve.

If all weeds in the church were rooted out on the spot, then a wild, rebellious, young renegade named Augustine should have been struck dead in the 4th century. The church, however, would have lost a saint and a bishop whose theology instructed Martin Luther and the whole protest reformation.

If the church should pluck up and throw out any weed upon first sight, John Newton, captain of a slave ship should have been eliminated from the book of life. Of course, then he may not have been converted and we would never have heard or sung his hymn "Amazing Grace".

God has more patience than we do. God's love means that the Christ holds off judgement, trying always to redeem life. We can't see the future, but we can trust God to be at work in the lives of our sisters and brothers. Maybe we should spend more time seeking to understand than being quick to judge and more time praying for one another than trying to rid the church of those who don't do as we want, with whom we have disagreement, or whom we find difficult.