

Getting in the Weeds

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher
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We are going to get into the weeds this week. The parable that Jesus tells in Matthew is literally and figuratively messy. It is not neatly groomed or even tied up into an easy to understand message. At one point this week I texted pastor Mary and when she asked how my sermon was coming, I responded, “I’m in the weeds and now I know why I have never preached on this passage before!” As we are about to read this parable, remember that Jesus is trying to convey to the followers what it means to be part of God’s people. He uses this illustration to help us understand that if we are God’s children things do not always look so neat or orderly. **Matthew 13:24-30:**

²⁴He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Gregg and I love going to the MN Arboretum We love to look at the beauty of the gardens which is a combination of nature’s finest and a lot of hard work that others have done. We were very excited when they reopened the Arboretum to a limited number of visitors. One thing we noticed is that the Arboretum depends on many volunteers to keep the beds weeded. This year that was not possible. There were places where the flowerbeds were not as well defined as they had been. There were places where the wildness of

unwelcome growth was taking over. Without attention and care, there were many weeds that made their home among the intentional plantings.

Like so many other aspects of our life. The pandemic disrupts the gardens. The tidy flowerbeds get neglected and like the enemy in the night in Jesus' parable, the weeds are given opportunity to grow and flourish when our attention is turned to other things. This parable is confusing because Jesus' followers are ready for instruction. They want to do something to share God's kingdom. They want to root out the undesirable weeds to make sure God's message is clear...standing there for ALL to hear. This is where the sower's response seems surprising because the sower tells the workers not to go in there and pull out those unwanted weeds. The sower instructs them to let the weeds continue to grow. He reasons that it will all sort out in the end...the good seeds will eventually be gathered into the planter's barn while the weeds will be cast away.

Later in Matthew, the disciples take Jesus aside to ask him to explain this parable from **Matthew 13:36-43**:

³⁶Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." ³⁷He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Suddenly this innocent parable takes an eschatological turn (related to death) symbolically explaining how growing plants leads to what happens in end times. It becomes problematic, thus my text to Pastor Mary. First, because Jesus is all about the Kingdom of God at hand, not off in some nebulous vague future. Second, Jesus is not in the habit of spelling out what his parables

mean. Parables are usually left open ended...ready for our own interpretation. It is up to each of us to figure out what parables mean in our own lives. Some scholars think this passage was written as an interpretation of Jesus' parable for the early church, the intended readers of Matthew's gospel. The people of the young church were consumed by the fact that the end time would happen during their natural lifetimes. The church was also in the midst of great persecution and suffering. Jesus explains this parable to mean that soon, very soon, the angels will come and those who are evil will have their judgment and those who stand firm will have their reward. However, for us today talk of devils and evil in such stark terms takes away from the power of the parable as it relates to our own lives.

Let us not get distracted by placing such a narrow interpretation on Jesus' parable. Let us start with the sower as the Holy Spirit planting good seeds in the ground. These good seeds could be a number of things we need as Children of God. For today let us take the seeds of *mercy, love, justice and righteousness*. The seeds are planted with the expectation of germinating, bearing fruit and multiplying.

But then a dastardly thing happens...weeds sabotage the garden and threaten God's plan of growing the good seeds. The weeds are too many to ignore. What do we do with the weeds?

Let's look at what the weeds can do. Weeds have a way of distracting us. At times, all we can see are the weeds. Ask any gardener worth their salt about the hours they spend getting rid of weeds. Ask them how successful they are. Have you noticed that when you admire someone's garden, all the gardener can see are the weeds -- those that have not been scourged have popped up since the last labor-intensive plucking. To gardeners, weeds distract from the plants that are growing. We too, get caught up in the weeds around us. For example, we see that we are unable to worship together. Focusing on what we *cannot* do, we fail to see how God is touching the lives of each of us as we work harder to connect beyond these very walls. The weeds will be with us. Let us not be distracted by them.

We hear the words about God's love, but then there are those weeds around us! We know that God is with us, but those weeds are all that we can see. As

people trying our best to be faithful followers of the Risen Christ, we need to let go of the weeds and hang onto what we know about God! *Love will prevail.*

Many weeds are imposters. Most weeds really do not start out as weeds. In our yard in Illinois, we had a little patch of Creeping Charlie in it. Creeping Charlie seems harmless and has such a pretty blue flower and we did not want to resort to chemicals. We let the little plant be. Well you know what happened. The next thing I knew, my husband is rototilling half our front yard just to get rid of that innocent looking little flowering ground cover.

There are some things that we know without a doubt are not *just or right*. We would not mug a person or rob a bank, but the weediness in our life is far more subtle. In the name of being nice and trying to keep the peace, we do not take issue with an offensive remark by a colleague or relative. In trying not to come off as overly sensitive, we let things drop when someone else strongly states an opinion that is counter to God's good seeds. Our inactions seem the right thing to do but they become imposters and in fact help sow divisiveness and perpetuate hatred and division. We refrain from correcting a wrong for the sake of peace. We cannot achieve true peace by ignoring the injustice around us. Those innocent little Creeping Charlie flowers can wreak havoc in a garden if left unchecked just as those off hand comments left unchallenged can perpetuate great harm.

Do not underestimate a weed. In order for weeds to survive throughout the continuing battle of agriculture, they become clever and tenacious. They adapt to their environment in ways that trick us. We have a book study going at Oak Grove on Robin D'Angelo's book, *White Fragility*. Personally, I am being challenged and pushed out of my comfort zone with this book. D'Angelo is redefining the concept of racism...not in good and bad terms but in the way racism is infused with most every aspect of our culture so that it reaches all of us. Racism is part of our history and it continues. It has done so by being adaptive. Today we all can agree that slavery is wrong. One hundred and fifty years ago, people would take issue with that statement. Their economic survival depended on slavery and even Christians defended it or at least looked away from it. Slavery today is a weed we have destroyed; however,

racism continues to thrive. Racism finds ways to adapt to the present conditions and sensibilities. Racism occurs in choosing where we live, in our education system, in our banking system. It finds ways to encroach in almost every aspect of life. These are weeds of discrimination that tend to survive even when laws are passed and protest take place. The weeds are tenacious.

As God sows the seeds of mercy and love, righteousness and justice, those clever weeds begin to look like the seeds we desire (as Gregg and I did with Creeping Charlie). They adapt to what we think is true and just and right. In the end, they crowd out God's truth.

Our world today is filled with distractions and imposters -- and clever and tenacious weeds. We can easily succumb to the things that really do not matter. We can easily get caught in the brambles of discord and divisions and follow things that truly do not really amount to much. Jesus tells this story of good seeds among the weeds. The story he tells is that the weeds will come and they will not go away while the good seeds are trying to grow and take root. Growing mercy, love justice and righteousness is not easy and will be fraught with challenges and threats. Jesus' message is that in the end, the good plants will truly matter. In the meantime, let us focus on the growing plants that God sows in this world. Let us focus on the plants that grow in God's light of day and will bear fruit and multiply. The apostle Paul says to the first-generation church in Philippi, "Whatever is *true*, whatever is *honorable*, whatever is *pure*, whatever is *pleasing*, whatever is *commendable*, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." These are the seeds we want to take root and grow.

What do we do about these weeds? We do not give into them; we do what we can to shed light on God's goodness in this weedy world. We resist those clever imposters. The good sower plants seeds of *mercy* and *love*, *justice* and *righteousness* to name a few. So, let us do what Jesus says, "Anyone with ears, listen!"

Make those good seeds count! Amen