

Pulling Weeds or Living With Weeds
Matthew 13:24-30

Those of you who are gardeners are familiar with Murphy's First Law of Gardening: When weeding, the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant.

And, of course, there is a corollary to that law: To distinguish flowers from weeds, simply pull up everything. What grows back is weeds.

You have heard before the parable of the sower and from that Parable you may have learned that different kinds of soil receive seeds differently and produce differing levels of results. I would like you to insert the word hearts instead of soil. And with that concept think of that Parable now you may have learned that different kinds of soil/HEARTS receive seeds differently and produce differing levels of results.

So today we are confronted with the question: what do you do with the weeds? Because we know, those who have ever tried to plant a flower garden, or a vegetable garden or even a plain ordinary lawn, the weeds are going to come.

So, listen to Jesus' parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

"An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

"No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. At that time, I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles. Let both grow together until the harvest. to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'

Once you start weeding things out, where do you stop? Which must have been on the owner's mind (the owner of the field in the parable, I mean), given his response to his servants: Leave the weeds alone. Let 'em grow. As problems go, that's one less for you to worry about. Just let things be. Because once you start, you will end up doing more harm than good. So don't start. Get rid of your weed digger, weed cutter, weed eater and weed whacker. Retire your Round-Up. Trash your trowel. Sheath your scythe. For God's sake, cut the weeds some slack.

Now you've got to remember that this story is told as a parable of the Kingdom. And the Kingdom is about God and how God works... not necessarily about us and how we work. God is clearly the owner-figure here. And God is saying to the servant-figures (guess who they are?): "Let's get clear about my role in this process, as distinguished from your role in this process. Your role in this process is to leave the weeds alone."

Why? Two reasons.

First, because you can't always tell which are weeds and which aren't. Not because you are stupid or horticulturally challenged, but because things are not always what they appear to be. Weeds and wheat do not come clearly marked. You may think you know the difference. But you don't.

Second, we are to leave well enough alone, not only because God can tell weeds from wheat, but because God can turn weeds into wheat. Weeds today. Wheat tomorrow. It's really quite possible. That is, if you believe in God and in the power of God.

I've seen it happen. You've seen it happen. It's happened all around you. Maybe it's even happened to you. Look back at your old pictures. I'll bet some of you looked pretty weedy. I'll bet some of you were the little kid your friends' parents didn't want them to play with. I'll bet some of you were the kid who, at one time or another, someone thought, ought to be weeded from the classroom. I'll bet some of you were the kid who the coach was advised to drop from the team (can't throw, can't hit, can't catch, drools in the outfield, get rid of him). I'll bet some of you were the creep some girl's father told her to dump, or the girl about whom some guy's mother said: "She's all right, I guess. But she's not for you." I'll even bet some of you were the college roommate that parents prayed their son or daughter would never be linked with. But look at you, you little weed. Look at what you became. Thank God, somebody spared the sickle way back then. You might have been history.

Not that some aren't... history, I mean. They did something wrong... got labeled... got weeded... got themselves yanked right out of the garden. Once a weed. Always a weed.

But back to our story. This is a judgment parable. Matthew is big on judgment parables. Matthew is big on judgment language. Whenever you read words like "weeping ... wailing ... gnashing of teeth ... outer darkness ... consuming fire" ... you can pretty much figure you are reading from the book of Matthew.

But, in this parable, it is clear that judgment is God's business. Meaning that it is not our business. We are not the Sower in the story. We are not the judge in the story. We are not even the seeds in the story.

We want to be the would-be "helpful servants" ... that's who we want to be. And you will remember that the helpful servants approach the owner of the field, having noted the weeds growing in the wheat, and suggest that they go out and do a little weeding. Instead, they are told to keep their hands off. "Let the weeds grow along with the wheat," the owner says. Then he adds: "I'll take care of things at the harvest."

But We can't keep our hands off, even when told to do so. We want to be the ones who sift, sort and separate. We want to be the ones who thin the house. Turn us loose with our shovels and machetes ... not to mention our wonderful bottles of Round-Up ... and there's no telling what (or who) we will chop down, pull up, or spray into oblivion.

Picture me as the "helpful servant." Picture me going through your yard with my handy clippers and trowel. Better yet, picture me going through your church.

Weed. Wheat.

Weed. Wheat.

Weed, Weed, Weed.

Wheat, Wheat, Wheat.

All weeds in this pew. All wheat in that pew.

Which I could do. Except that I wouldn't know where to start. But that doesn't stop some people. We know them, the ones who think they know exactly where to start.

This one goes. That one stays.

This group's all right. That group we can do without.

The way we deal with each other can also turn out to be a matter of unfortunate weed-pulling at times. Of course, every Christian congregation has its weeds, I suppose. But who are the weeds? Again, we tend to over-generalize. The weeds we usually suppose are the people who never come to church. The Christmas and Easter members are the ones we'd like to yank out. Others are considered pollutant plants when they don't contribute to the church's treasury. There are always those who only put in a few bucks once or twice a year, you know.

All these we tend to consider "delinquent members." What are we to do with them? Sometimes the leaders of churches, not yours, but some church leaders, get weed-happy. They are ready to "clean house." Let's give these faithless folks an ultimatum, and after that, let's remove their names from the list.

Now, I'm not one for promoting laxity slackers, freeloaders, among church members, but I have always hesitated to just yank a member off the roles. Because in the process isn't there the distinct danger of injuring or uprooting other good grain? Don't we run the risk of offending and estranging other members of the family who may be coming to church? Do we always understand the whole background behind what we call a church delinquent? People go through dormant stages, like seeds and plants. There are phases of church membership, high pitches and low, especially among young people and young marrieds, that we ought to reckon with. Again, the question, who really are the weeds? What might we be doing in pulling some of the weeds? Yes, who are the weeds in the church? I'll say one thing. Many a church member who comes to worship every week and gives an envelope regularly has turned out to be a thorn in the flesh for the life of the church. There are bothersome, meddlesome, gossipy church members who have done more ruin to the Body of Christ than some quiet, distant member who just isn't turned on by his faith at the present time. Talk about weeds! The slanderous remarks and behind-the-back talking by some church members can choke out the effective mission and work of all Christian Church. Sad to say, most contention and tension within church communities is caused by active, prominent, "upright" members of the church. We do have to be careful not to over-generalize about where the weeds are growing in the church, don't we? Now what does that mean for us? A constant theme in Jesus' teaching is that his followers were not to pass judgment on others. This is very important. Traditionally, the primary sin of highly religious people is being self-righteous and judgmental. Such people were some of the main concerns of Jesus. Might I suggest in our attempt to be "helpful Servants" we have a tendency to judge for ourselves who is fit for the kingdom and who is not. This is a dangerous tendency. I want to suggest to you we cannot be the ones to decide who is wheat and who is a weed.

First of all, we should not judge others because we ourselves are not totally acceptable. But there is a second and even more important reason we are not to judge others. When we pass judgment on others, we distance ourselves from them. You see the real problem with passing judgment on others is that it does not allow us to be vehicles of God's grace. Our central task is to help other people experience God's grace just as we have experienced that grace. We cannot do that if we come across as one with a condemning attitude. Besides, we simply don't know what kind of hurts other people may have experienced.

Jesus says to you and me, "Let the wheat and weeds both grow together." That was the way of Jesus himself, think for a moment about his life on Earth.

So let God be the judge. Let him act! He knows all. He sees all. He does everything the best. Do what we are told to do!! Do not pass judgement but let us be faithful workers and believers in his vineyard. Let us be the strong, healthy, best wheat that he can make us. In the meantime, let's focus on what God has called us to do to love all people and to witness to the amazing grace of God as shown in Jesus Christ.

And leave the rest to God.