

Sermon (7/23/17, Matthew 13: 24-30 & 36-43):

During my time off a couple of weeks ago, we spent a few days in Colonial Williamsburg. As Virginia usually is this time of year, it was very hot and very humid. One of these days maybe we'll actually get smart enough to make this trip some time other than the summer months. On the upside, though, it's the time of year when the gardens around the historic buildings are in full bloom. Everywhere we went, we saw gardens of stunning beauty, bursting with meticulously groomed bushes, beautiful flowers and ripe produce. They were nearly perfect. In fact, almost too perfect. You know why? No weeds! That's right - one would be hard pressed to find a single weed anywhere! No ugly crabgrass, dandelions, or overgrown patches of green infiltrators crowding out the beauty of the flowers. It almost seemed surreal.

Many of us have gardens of some sort during the summer months whether it be a patch of flowers in our front yard, a few bushes lining the side of our house, a vegetable garden in our backyard, or maybe a window sill box lined with flowers. As such, most of us know how hard it is to keep the weeds at bay. They are a formidable foe.

Each year, for example, I make an effort to conquer the weeds that infest my lawn and each year the weeds win. In fact, I've resigned myself to the fact that if it weren't for the weeds, I wouldn't have a lawn at all. At least, especially after I mow it, the weeds are green.

Jesus' parables tend to refer to things that people were familiar with in his day and since it was an agrarian society we find a lot of references to planting and harvesting. Today's parable is of that nature. In it, Jesus tells the story of a farmer who, as he presumably did every year, began the season with a fresh planting of wheat. Most likely, this was preceded by a careful preparation of the soil.

After all their hard labor, the farmer and his servants went to bed that night knowing that the rest was up to God. They had done all they could and now the germination of the seeds and the growing of the plants was something they had to patiently wait for.

When the plants finally did break through the ground, a disturbing reality became evident. Intermingled with the plants were nasty weeds,

which some have surmised to be tares or something called ‘Bearded Darnels’. (Interesting name for a weed.) This is a most insidious type of weed as its roots wrap around the roots of the wheat. It sucks up needed nutrients and scarce water. It even looks like wheat at first until it begins to seed. The seeds are dangerous, even deadly when consumed. (Makes me appreciate all the more the clover in my yard!)

Being the experienced farmers they were, the servants immediately recognize the weeds and are significantly alarmed.

Their first reaction is to blame the farmer. ‘Hey boss,’ they say. ‘Did you buy that cheap stuff again from the Acme seed company!’ (You know, the same company that sold Wile E Coyote all those lame gadgets he used to try and catch the roadrunner.)

It’s an interesting response reminding us of how quick we are to gravitate to the question ‘why’ when something detrimental happens. Why did this happen? Who should we blame? Who’s at fault? At least, in this case, they asked the farmer directly these questions but how often do the fingers point and the accusations fly behind people’s backs?

As it turns out, this wasn’t the owner’s fault at all. Unlike the reckless farmer in the parable about the sower just previous to this one, this farmer went to great lengths to make sure this seed was good and it fell on good soil. Somewhere in the night, however, an enemy, an evil force showed up, short circuiting this good farmer’s efforts. This enemy scattered not only seeds that would turn into weeds but weeds of the worst kind. It was a cruel and despicable act intended to destroy this poor farmer’s livelihood.

The second reaction the servants have is an impulsive one. “We need to go out there and yank those weeds up!” They say. “We need to fix this in a hurry.”

‘Whoa, hold your horses...’ The farmer orders as the servants anxiously whip out their weeding tools. “You guys have been farming for as long as I have. Consider the type of weed this is. If we start pulling them up what’s going to happen to the wheat? It’s going to get pulled up too and then we’ll have nothing...absolutely nothing.”

This parable reminds us of how impulsive we can be which often

leads to later regret. Knee jerk responses to protect, to eradicate threats, to purify, to determine who's in and who's out. If only we could just get rid of those weeds, we think, then everything would be wonderful. If only we could get rid of those Democrats or Republicans or Independents or radicals or weirdos or complainers or thorns in our side... then we'd have it made.

The church is no innocent bystander. How many times has it set up both spoken and unspoken limits as to who can be a part of it? How many times has it used guilt and shame and even scripture to put down, demean, and exclude? How many people have been pushed away because of things the church has done and/or said?

The impulse to run out into the field and yank up anything that appears threatening is great when fear gets the best of us. What we need is a good farmer to call us back to a place of reason. It takes courage, sometimes, to be that farmer and, when our adrenaline is running strong, we might even deem such voices as weed-like. Yet, impulse is a strong part of our nature that often needs tamping down.

“Hey, whoa, hold your horses,” the Farmer yells. “Put down those killer sticks and killer words and think. You know better? You’ve been doing this church thing long enough to know that there is no such thing as a perfect, purified church. There’s no such thing as a perfect family, perfect community, perfect nation, or perfect world. There’s no such thing as the good guys on that side of the fence and the bad guys on the other. In fact, the truth is that within each one of us there is both good seed and bad weeds intricately woven together. To yank out the weeds is to yank out the good too until there’s nothing left but empty churches and empty communities and empty nations and, worst of all, empty people.

The ending of the parable is hard as it seems to focus on judgement and destruction but I think the emphasis here is not so much on destruction as it is on the promise that God will make things right. In the end, the weeds inside of us and the weeds that cause so much destruction, hurt, and harm in creation will finally meet their match.

Consider, for example, someone struggling with an addiction of some sort. Try as they might, an addiction is a weed that is very difficult to kill.

Even with all the latest medical aids, the best counseling, and the strongest of support groups the threat of this weed taking root again never goes away. For someone struggling with an addiction like this, they know how dangerous this weed can be and the damage it can do to themselves and others. Yet, as Paul once said, ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, and I do the very thing I hate.’ An addiction is a weed that is virulent. It is also a weed that God promises to one day burn off like chaff, finally setting free those who are afflicted by it.

What made the gardens in Colonial Williamsburg feel surreal, is the absence of any and all weeds. I’m sure, if I looked hard enough, I probably could have found a few, but it wouldn’t have been easy. Life is not like those gardens, however. It’s more like my lawn and, yes, never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that my weed infested lawn would make for a good sermon illustration but, in this case, it’s perfect! Life is like my lawn – full of weeds. And those weeds aren’t just out there but they are also inside of us all.

What the farmer advocates for in this parable is patient waiting. Not inaction but patience. After all the farmer and his workers would still need to tend to this field, weeds and all, doing their best to care for it but, ultimately, theirs was not a responsibility to purify the field. To do so, would only damage it. For now, their job was to find a way to cope with the strange and difficult paradox of living, working, and being faithful in a field and a world where the good we want to do and the good we want to see is often hard to come by. Of course, that deeply frustrates our demands for answers to our ‘whys’ but it is what the farmer advocates. Patient, faithful waiting is the only answer and, who knows, maybe someday this great farmer will pull off the greatest of miracles where, for once, the wheat will finally succeed in crowding out the weeds. Now wouldn’t that be something!

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, we come to you this morning recognizing our frustrations of living in a world that abounds with weeds. Very often, in response, our impulse is to strike, to act with aggression, to attempt to eradicate these weeds on our own with little regard to the patience you implore. Forgive us, we ask, even as we pray for farmers who dare to speak with voices of reason and for ears that are willing to hear and heed their cautions.

Gracious God, when we are tempted to react and, in the process, become weeds ourselves killing the spirits and lives of your beloved children, speak to us.

When we are discouraged by the weeds that cause us to choke and gasp, give us the courage to wait and act with gentle patience.

When we are ready to give up because we feel the weeds have won, energize us with hope so that we might go into the field to water the dry earth with our compassion, to feed the hungry with our labors, and to do good with the conviction that, in the end, your kingdom *will* come on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray this, O God, knowing that you love us and your love will ultimately prevail just as it turned the weeds of Good Friday into the thriving wheat of Easter morn. And so, in boldness, we ask you to bring healing and hope to all those who are ill, frail, discouraged, grieving, wounded, and in distress. We particularly ask you to hear the prayers we now mention in our silence or aloud....

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.