

VII after Pentecost (Proper 16) Year A
The Rev'd Canon Catherine Ascah
St. John the Evangelist, Smiths Falls ~ July 19, 2020

Weeds—what makes a weed different from any other plant that grows? Plants growing where they are not wanted. Plants not purposefully planted. Weeds. Undesirable. Without purpose. Unwanted by some. Yet I distinctly remember as a child picking bright dandelions, bluey-purple thistles and Queen Anne's lace and proudly bringing these little bouquets home in my tightly clenched fist time and again to present to my mother. She was always, to her great credit, kind and warm in her appreciation. She would take these offerings and immediately find a small bud vase, filling it with water and arranging the ragged posy, often placing it in the centre of the kitchen table. A centerpiece of weeds.

Jesus, teaching his followers about what God's kingdom was like, told the parable of the weeds, the good seed and the bad. The kingdom of heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. That night, while his hired men were asleep, his enemy sowed thistles all through the wheat and slipped away before dawn. When the first green shoots appeared and the grain began to form, the thistles showed up, too.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God turn common sense ideas of the world upside down. If you want a good garden, a good field, a good business model, you don't want to be reading Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God. Sowers sowing seed recklessly and generously, even in places seed is unlikely to grow as we heard last week; paying workers who worked but an hour the same as those who worked the whole day; a farmer telling his servants, "Don't pull up the weeds; let the wheat and the weeds grow together."

The kingdom is compared to a field with both wheat and weeds growing together.

The servants in the parable say, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where did all these weeds come from?" The land owner said, "An enemy is responsible." The servants say, "Well, let us go out and pull all the weeds up!" "Not a good idea", the master replies.

Like the servants, who see the weeds and want to pull them up, we would really like to get rid of all the weeds—all of the things we see in people we believe are not like us—which invade our fields:

the theology that doesn't fit with our own enlightened understanding;

the hypocrisy of people claiming God but excluding neighbour;

those who would accuse us of racism or bigotry when we toil our way through life thinking we are working for justice.

Often, we are inclined to focus our energy on pulling up all of what we perceive as weeds: dangerous or questionable expressions of faith; different points of view; different ideas on how things should be, who should receive help, who is worthy of our time or attention; and by focusing on pulling up what we perceive as weeds, ensuring the only people representing God and the church have passed the proper litmus test in our view.

We entrench ourselves into an “us vs. them” mentality where dialogue is impossible and our notions of reconciliation and community are based in an imperative of having to convince others that we are right and they must change their mind.

Augustine of Hippo spoke of the church as the *corpus permixtum*, a *mixed body* of believers. In the mixed body of the church and in our world, where wheat and weeds grow together in the same field, it is tempting to spend our time identifying and removing the weeds. The trouble with this, as we heard in the parable, is that we risk harming the good things growing in our midst. And we risk becoming so distracted by the weeds that we forget to live out the goodness out of which God created us and towards which God calls here and now.

Perhaps this parable shifts our attention away from our attempts to rightly interpret what is “good” and what is “evil,” and instead invites us to focus our energy on the crucial Work of Love we are called to.

Presiding Episcopal Church Bishop Michael Curry in a post this past week about the uncertain times we live in says that today, like Peter and the disciples, we must discern a new normal...and that new normal can be discerned by following God’s rubric of love.

If you’re overwhelmed by all that is happening in our world, then this parable of the weeds shows us that we can live as people of faith in anxious times. Rather than calling us to put on our gardening gloves and pluck out what we believe is questionable—questionable faith, theology, understandings of God and the world, questionable politics—we are to be *wheat*, to do good, to produce good seed, to seek justice, even in a field where weeds surround us. Instead of being sidetracked or distracted by what we perceive as noxious weeds, or anything not aligned with God’s love and the kingdom in our mind, what if we put all of our energy into being wheat instead of pulling up weeds?

Our lives as followers of Jesus must be focused on our steady, enduring, active, and resilient witness to God’s radical and enduring love, especially in a world in which weeds get misidentified and the signs of God’s reign aren’t always clearly perceived. Ultimately, our presence in the world as Christians is not to seek out and purge sin and evil—that’s God’s job, and as some of us in this past week’s Bible Q&A’s discovered, we may not always like how he does it. Rather, our purpose as followers of Jesus in the world is to invest our energy in embodying this radical love of God in our everyday living, to love deeply even when love is hard to come by, to dream with God about what is possible even in the face of the impossible, to open wide our hearts, even in a field with some questionable plants in company.