

Life in a Messy Garden

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.

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.

Hear now a contemporary retelling of today's parable, that might make sense in a more urban, technical culture:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a programmer who started many processes on her computer. While everyone was sleeping, a hacker broke in and started some counterfeit jobs, which began using some of the CPU time. The programmer's assistants said, "Didn't you start useful jobs on the computer? Where then did these counterfeits come from?" "A hacker did this," she replied. The assistants asked her, "Do you want us to kill the jobs?" "No," she answered, "because while you are killing them, some good processes might be interrupted by accident. Let them all go to completion. Then we will purge every counterfeit process from the disk and memory, and save the results of every good process onto the cloud." (Matthew 13:24-30)

Let those who have ears ... and half a brain ... hear and consider.

Dr. Harry Ironside was a preacher from an earlier era. His father died when he was two years old, so Harry grew up poor. It didn't bother him. In his day, most people were poor. When Harry was fourteen years old, he got a job helping a cobbler – a shoemaker. Harry's job was to take leather that had soaked all night in a tub of water and beat the water out of it, using an iron anvil and a wooden mallet. Beating the wet leather softened it – and also toughened it.

There was another cobbler down the street. Harry learned that the other cobbler soaked the leather but didn't bother beating the water out of it. When that cobbler nailed a shoe together, water would splash everywhere. When Harry asked him about it, the man winked at him and said, "Ah, they come back all the quicker this way."

Harry went back to his cobbler and told that story. Then he asked why his cobbler bothered to

have Harry beat the water out of the leather. The man stopped his work and sat down. He said:

"You know, son, I expect to see every pair of shoes I've ever made in a big pile at the judgment seat of Christ. And I expect the Lord to take those shoes and go through every one, and examine the work I did. And then I expect, I imagine oftentimes, he'll take one and he'll look at me and say, 'Dan, that's not up to par. You didn't do a very good job there.' But others, he'll encourage me by saying, 'Dan, that was a splendid job.'"

You know, when I make shoes, I keep remembering that. And I want to make shoes so that every shoe I make will pass the judgment of the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ."

Don't you wish you had a shoemaker like that! Don't you wish you had a carpenter like that! And a plumber! Don't you wish that your politicians would be concerned about passing an examination like that?! Don't you wish that the people responsible for customer service would live up to that standard! If they did, someone would answer your telephone call by the third ring – and they would actually try to help you!

What would it be like if everyone lived every day conscious of the fact that the day will come when Jesus will sift through every moment of every day with them, saying, "Good job on this one!" and "Not so good on this one." What would life be like if we all did that? It would be like heaven on earth.

But life isn't like that, is it! The people who serve us don't often live up to that standard – although some do. I am thankful to God for those who do. I am thankful for having found an honest auto mechanic. I am thankful for the maintenance man at our apartment complex, who unplugs toilets and does whatever else is necessary, and is always good-natured and kind. I am thankful for people who greet me by name when I go into the bank. I am thankful for the carpenter who measures twice before cutting once. I am thankful for the plumber whose pipes hold water. I have a fair number of people like that in my life, as I'm sure you do, and I value them.

But life isn't always like that. Lots of people are careless, and some are just downright evil. I lock my doors. I watch where I go after dark. I run antivirus software on my computer. When our children were young, we didn't let them out of our sight. My life has a good deal of light – but it also has shadows, just like everyone's. I think it's best to try to avoid the shadows.

If you think that the early church was a holier-than-thou place, just read First Corinthians. The Christians in Corinth were guilty of all kinds of sins, including one man who was living with his father's wife. That's a pretty rowdy bunch.

Matthew's Gospel is written from a particular perspective. Matthew was a Jewish Christian and had great respect for the Law. Matthew wanted Christians to behave properly, but he knew that they wouldn't always do that. But Matthew had another side too – a softer side – a more

gracious side. He also knew that God is wise – and God is faithful. So Matthew included this parable that we call the Parable of the Weeds.

In this parable, Jesus tells about an enemy who sows weeds among his neighbor's wheat. What a dirty thing to do! The weeds were darnel, which look like wheat when it is growing. It's impossible to separate darnel from wheat while it's growing. The farmer had to wait until the harvest. Only then could they be separated.

So the workers came to the master asking what to do. Should they pull the weeds? The master said: *"No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let 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"* (vv. 29-30).

The message for the church was that they should not be too quick on the draw when it came to making judgments about good and bad. God sees things more clearly than we do, and God will be responsible in the end for sorting out the bad from the good.

The message for us is that we could do more bad than good if we judge people wrongly. Judgment is God's job, not ours.

One of my favorite theologians, Mr. Rogers, used to say: *"Have you ever noticed that the very same people who are bad sometimes are the very same people who are good sometimes?"*

It reminds me of an old story called, *"Two Wolves."* It goes like this:

"An old Cherokee once told his grandson about a fight that was going on inside of him. He said it was between two wolves. One was evil: Anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, gossip, resentment, and false pride. The other was good: Joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. The grandson thought about it for a moment and then asked his grandfather, 'Which wolf do you think will win?' The old Cherokee replied, 'The one I feed.'"

One day a proper church lady was on a city bus. She was reading her Bible while she rode. A drunk staggered on to the bus and sat down in the seat next to her. She looked up from her Bible and said, "You know, you are going straight to hell!"

The drunk stood up and said, "Oh no! I got on the wrong bus."

Dr. Will Willimon is a preacher of some fame. He serves as United Methodist bishop in North Alabama. Previously he served for a number of years as chaplain at Duke University. He wrote about the difference between the positions:

Some years ago I left academia. Sometimes people ask, "What do you most miss about life in the university, compared with your life now as church bureaucrat?"

I answer: "I miss most the Duke office of admissions. The university admissions office insured that I would never be forced to work with anyone who was not like me - same background, same gifts for manipulating the system to my advantage. Church, on the other hand, is notoriously nonselective. We pastors are forced to work with anybody whom Jesus drags in the door".

In response to the question, "*Who is my neighbor?*" reformer John Calvin said, of course we think well of our friends and family, no great surprise in that. The odd thing is that Christ dares to command us to love our enemies. How is that possible? Calvin answers, "*All should be contemplated in God, not in themselves.*"

That's the great challenge of being in the church and being the church in the world: to look upon people through the eyes of God rather than from our own limited, judgmental human perspective. If we look directly at the human race, says Calvin, unaided by God, we will feel more hate than love. We are, in our sin, justly deserving of righteous scorn. But we must look upon people as God looks at people. The ability not only to endure, but also to love one another - even to love people who sit next to us on the pew in church - arises from our theological commitments.

If other people knew all about any one of us, they would find many things they wouldn't like. They would find things that should keep us out of heaven. They would find things that would disqualify us as Christians.

But the Christian faith starts with the belief that God is merciful. God's mercy is our only hope. So we can expect to meet some people in heaven who might surprise us. And some of them might well be surprised to see us, as well.

The teaching of the parable is clear: there will come a time when the wheat is separated from the weeds. But only God is in a position to judge which is which. In the meantime we can 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.

Rev. John W. Caster
Trinity Presbyterian Church
July 23, 2017