

Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43 "Garden Full of Weeds" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/23/17

The infamous Ralph Waldo Emerson said that a weed is a "plant whose virtues have yet to be discovered." The infamous Randy Haynes says that a weed is "anything growing which isn't supposed to be there." I rather like Randy's assessment over Emerson's. I remember taking some youth to do some weeding as a service project for an elderly woman in the church and it didn't go exactly as planned. I found myself dashing back and forth to earnest questions, "Janet, is this a weed?" as their hands strangled the throat of an innocent begonia or a tomato sapling ready to uproot it at a single nod. Fearing for the lives of daisies and day lilies, there were even moments I wasn't sure so I would go ask the kind-hearted woman who was entrusting her garden to our inexperienced hands. It seemed we all needed someone wiser to tell us what belonged and what was to be cast out into the compost bin.

Weeds are a dangerous commodity to a garden and there are no more deceptive weeds than the one spoken of in Jesus' parable today. Known in biblical terms as "tares," bearded darnel is a devil of a weed which seems to have no virtues. Its roots surround the roots of good plants, sucking up precious nutrients and scarce water, making it impossible to root it out without damaging the good crop. Above the ground, darnel looks identical to wheat, until it bears seed. These seeds can cause everything from hallucinations to death. Is it any wonder that Jesus uses this noxious weed to illustrate the presence of evil in our midst? Bearded darnel, also known as false wheat, is the botanical equivalent of the "ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing" Matthew speaks of in chapter 7. To make matters worse, Jesus indicates the weeds have been put there intentionally, not accidentally. So the servants in the parable ask the householder, "Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?" But the householder replies, "No, for in gathering the weeds, you will 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.'" It is a rather surprising answer. As Robert Farrar Capon points out, "This is no way to run a farm. Maybe Jesus wasn't as good at gardening as he was at being a carpenter." So is that all there is to the picture, to this parable? A young kindergartner was shown the infamous 1871 painting by James McNeil Whistler entitled, "Whistler's Mother," and was asked what he thought was going on in the picture. He responded, "The painting shows this nice old lady who is waiting for the repairman to bring back her TV." Is there more to that story, I wonder?

Chapter 13 of Matthew is filled with stories, one right after the other, parables which are intended to help Jesus' followers reimagine the world, called the realm or kingdom of God. These stories present a new option for living, according to Bernard Brandon Scott, one that contrasts with the default world of the everyday. Please note that one cannot understand these parables without understanding the imperial domination and governmental hold that strangled the people of that time. It held them by the throat and threatened to uproot them at every turn if they didn't comply and conform. As much as we would like to convince ourselves otherwise, these parables are indictments of the church of the day and its incestuous relationship with power, government, and wealth. Therefore, we cannot read Matthew's parables without asking the church of today whether it still applies? Do these stories still fit the tendencies of the church today; can we see ourselves within their drama; how we would explain the moral of the story? While some scholars argue that the moral or explanation provided in verses 36-43 could be a later addition to the manuscript, it still fits the known

pattern of teaching employed by the wisdom teachers. Therefore, it seems to prompt people to ask themselves, “Am I wheat, am I the good seed?” or “Am I a weed, the bad seed”?

The answer, come to find out, is that we are both. The story is about the community, the people of God, for the Church is both wheat and tares, and we like to think we know who’s who, as if we could put a sticker on each person’s nametag so we could accurately identify them. Tares? Sit in the back on the left. Wheat? Up front, here on the right. This parable shines a bright light on our inevitable human preoccupation with drawing lines between who is “in” and who is “out.” Ultimately, it applies to the ministry of Jesus himself, to the life of the church and to the future judgment at the end of the world. To the church of today, we recognize that our fields are a mixed-bag reality with healthy wheat and destructive weeds. Matters of behavior or theological and biblical orientation become the fodder for litmus tests of all varieties. We are constantly plagued with questions like, “Whom can we afford to let in, and who must remain out? Who is accepted by God, and why? Who is not accepted by God, and why not?” In the very act of asking such questions, we assume that it is our job to draw up the specs regarding the wideness of the church’s welcome. How wide, how big really, can it be and still be the church? Capon suggests that evil’s best strategy to bring down the community of God is to sucker good people into taking up arms against each other, while it sits back and laughs. Programs designed to get rid of evil are doomed to do exactly what the farmer suggests they will do. Since good and evil commonly inhabit not only the same field but even the same individual human beings, the only result of a dedicated campaign to get rid of evil will be the abolition of literally everybody.

Our lives are filled with mixed-bag realities, wheat and weeds growing side by side. Speaking to the gardener in all of us, what do we do with the weeds that now threaten the ideal harvest we had in mind? Tearing them out now only threatens the stability of the fruit soon to be mature – a difficult choice indeed, and it is not often obvious which is the wheat and which is the weed? What about the decision to get a job to support the family or stay at home and spend more time with the family? Or how about choosing the best school you've been accepted to versus the one that is more affordable? How do you support someone who consistently struggles at work pulling other colleagues down or simply firing them? Two different treatment options are available for a serious illness you face – how do you know which to choose? Do you stay in your current job where things are comfortable or do you choose to move on to newer, but unknown pastures? Do you give into peer pressures because it just plain sucks to be left out or do you choose to stick to your values and risk isolation? How does our faith relate to such issues? We rarely talk about such things in church, but this parable seems to indicate maybe we should.

What I hear from this parable is that in the ambiguities of life, there are going to be moments we don't choose well, sometimes things will go wrong, but God's ultimate promise is that God will sort things out in the end. Now maybe I am not hearing that clearly. After all, Jesus ends the parable, as he often does, with the words "For those who have ears to hear, let them hear," and as it turns out, my ears are failing me. It is a daunting predicament for one who relies on speech and hearing to make a living. My right ear is half-way gone and the left one is 25% gone, with ultimate deafness to come. Hearing aids will help, but not solve the problem and there is a lengthy process still to be done to be approved. I have already made

some mistakes in hearing people when they say something, in appearing to ignore them when I never heard them, and seeming to be disinterested when it is that I simply can't understand what was said. Compensation for such things comes in all shapes and sizes, everything from frustration, anger, disrespect, or helplessness, none of which are directed at others but are often misunderstood to be. So with a costly endeavor not covered by insurance on the horizon, I must make some difficult decisions for the sake of hearing. I have to think beyond myself recognizing that part of the meaning of life is to plant shade trees under which I may never sit. I have to trust the One who is smarter and stronger than the weed-sowing enemy. I have to believe in my heart that God will sort it out and I must have patience for the outcome. It is not the garden I planted, but it is my garden nonetheless. So I will work towards the goal of "ears to hear," and I will wait for that which God must do and which is not under my control, separating the good from the bad in due time.

Are we the wheat or are we the weeds? The answer, of course, is that we are both. But don't let that ambiguity tear you away from the goal. For those who have ears to hear, let us work toward reimagining and living within a new world, where it is not our job to decide who belongs or not, but instead to simply grow together until God's harvest. Thanks be to God.