

Betsey Moe
Sermon 2.28.10
“Living With Weeds”

Matthew 13:24-43

First Reading

24Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30Let 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.’”

Second Reading

36Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” 37He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; 38the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, 39and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. 40Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, 42and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Did you know that there is a way to know at a glance if a person is dependable or not? Abraham Levitt, the founder of Levittown, New York, said that the way you can tell is by looking at that person’s front lawn. Almost a hundred years ago, Levitt was busy planning and building the first official suburb in the United States, and he wrote, “A fine carpet of green grass stamps the inhabitants as good neighbors.”ⁱ By and large, we still live by those words. Americans spend about forty billion dollars a year on maintaining velvety-green lawns, free of dandelions and thistles, crabgrass and clover. I would like to think that I am above that petty desire for lawn perfection, until I remember that we paid our preschooler five cents for every yellow dandelion head he plucked from our front lawn last summer. He now has his first year of college tuition saved in nickels.

In today’s story from Matthew, there seems to be that same desire for weed-free perfection, this time in a wheat field. Jesus tells a parable of someone who sowed perfectly good wheat seed; and while everyone was asleep, an enemy came along and sowed weed seed. At first, everything seemed alright – one big green field. But as the wheat matured and crisped to gold, the weeds became glaringly obvious. The servants who helped with the crop said to the sower what I say

every spring: “Where, for the love of Pete, did these weeds come from?” The servants said, “Didn’t you sow only good seed in your field?” And, of course, the sower had. “Well,” said the servants, “do you want us to do something about the weeds? Can we go and gather them?” The servants were concerned – not just about their masters’ honor, but about their master’s crop. The field’s value in their minds depended on the field’s purity.

But the owner of the field did not take the servants up on their offer to purify that field. “We’re going to live with the weeds,” the field owner said. “At harvest time, my reapers will collect the weeds and burn them for fuel and will gather the wheat into my barn.”

“Live with the weeds.”

The servants’ question names the age-old struggle: Why, in a beautiful world created by God, is there evil? How did it get here? And what can we do about it? If we can *see* the weeds, wouldn’t it make sense to pull them now? It is one thing to ask these questions with the larger world in mind, wondering about selfish dictators and serial killers, but the context for this parable was the first century church. The question of rooting out evil was being asked by a fledgling Christian community that saw purity and uniformity of thought to be crucial for their community survival. This new church that Matthew was writing to had so many things to sort through: living under Roman power, there were some Christians who cooperated with the political leadership more than others; there was little group consensus on how to interpret the old Jewish law. It was a community in crisis, trying to establish a new, pure, Christian identity in the midst of wildly differing opinions. Naturally in that community, there were people who judged the people worshipping next to them to be weeds. Wouldn’t it be helpful, they might have thought, to root out the heretics, get rid of the troublemakers, those who did not agree with their own views of who Jesus was calling them to be?

But Jesus’ word to Matthew’s community was, “Live with the weeds.”

Of course, there are still those who desire the same purity in the church. Our battle in the Presbyterian Church over sexuality and ordination standards shows that the “root-out-the-weeds” mentality is alive and well on all sides of that issue. And there are other divisive issues – from how the larger church should be involved and vocal in politics and government to how local congregations should spend their money. New congregations and denominations are formed regularly on the basis of establishing a more untainted field. Whether or not you have strong feelings about some of the hot-button issues, Jesus’ word to those committed to his church is, “Live with the weeds.”

There is a theory that I studied in Pastoral Counseling classes called, “Family Systems Theory.” It is a lens through which to see congregational families and individual families – particularly those that don’t have it all together...which means *all* congregations and families. This theory says that in most families, there is a perceived “weed,” a troublemaker, someone who saps the energy of the whole family. In a congregation, this may be a controlling staff member or a gossiping elder, a member who gives a lot of money and tries to hold sway in major church decisions. In a family, the “weed” may be a rebellious son, an alcoholic mother, a chronically-unemployed sister, a daughter who thinks and lives *way* outside of the box. Family members

think, “If only this one person were ‘fixed,’ the whole family would be harmonious. But fixing that one person, pulling that one weed, is not only unrealistic, it is not what the family needs. No family system, no family field, is pure. Beneath the surface, good and bad roots are intertwined, and we all affect each other.

“Live with the weeds,” Jesus says.

And what *is* a weed, anyway? When it comes to identifying weeds with precision, we’ve got a problem, according to this parable: it is not harvest time yet, and if we make it our job to pull out the weeds, we may accidentally pull out wheat. Our view is limited.

Lucille and Maggie were two women who served together on the Christian Education committee at their church. Lucille had a way of seeing the dark side of every new idea that was brought up. According to Maggie, Lucille had just three responses in her repertoire: “We’ve never done it that way,” “That would be disastrous,” and “We have no money in the budget for that.” Maggie wondered about Lucille’s motivation for being on the committee. She wondered about Lucille’s faith. Maggie went to the pastor and asked if there was a way to fire Lucille from being a volunteer, or at least restructure the committee and move Lucille to some kind of a new subcommittee. Well, all of Maggie’s impassioned thoughts about the committee were put on hold when Maggie was diagnosed with breast cancer. And who visited her after the first committee meeting she missed? Lucille. Lucille set up meals to be brought to Maggie; Lucille prayed with Maggie. Lucille told her that she had fought breast cancer ten years before. “No one ever visited me except for the pastor,” she said. “And I don’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

“Live with the weeds,” Jesus says.

Does living with weeds mean that we are to do nothing when we are wronged? That we are to say nothing and do nothing in the face of sin and injustice? We know from the rest of scripture that passivity is *not* what the people of God are called to; even in Matthew, Jesus gives clear instructions about dealing with sin and disagreement between believers. In Matthew 18, Jesus says, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone” (18:15) – and if that doesn’t work, you take a witness along, and so forth. But right after that, Peter asks Jesus, “If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” And Jesus answers, “Seventy-seven times,” or, in other words, just keep forgiving. Our lives in Christian community will be marked not so much by purity, but by forgiveness.

“Live with the weeds.”

You see, it’s not that God doesn’t care about purity; it’s not that God doesn’t bother with evil. The second reading today, Jesus’ explanation of the parable, shows that the final destruction of the weeds is God’s job. The church *will* be pure – we just won’t be the ones who weed out the bad. This parable makes clear that in the end, there *will* be a day of God’s judgment, when the angels of God, with divine clarity, “will collect...all causes of sin and all evildoers,” and sin and evil will be destroyed; on the other hand, “the righteous will shine like the sun.” The good news

in which we hope, the reason we will have the patience to live with weeds is that evil will not, cannot, prevail. In the end, judgment and redemption will come from the One who owns and loves this field.

And so, for now, we are called simply to be servants. In the church and in our families, instead of trying to root out evil and get everyone to agree with us, we are called to engage in mission. Instead of nurturing resentment, we are called to practice forgiveness. This field is not perfect. In fact, weeds abound as much as dandelions in my front lawn. But the field owner has not given up hope. Thanks be to God.

¹ Elizabeth Kolbert, "Turf War," The New Yorker, 21 July 2008