

## **WEEDS AND WHEAT TOGETHER –10PA: A Sermon by Dan Stern at BCUCC, 7/20/08**

(Alas,) “Weeds. Can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em. (Today’s parable would appear to be) bad news for those of us with a low tolerance for varmints. Turns, out, the pest you love to hate is the pest you may need to live. Dandelion, crabgrass, flea: We Are Family (or at least in some kind of committed relationship)” (Anna Carter Florence).

Oh but come on, Jesus: who needs mosquitoes? Why not kill off all pests now, and uproot all the weeds? Why let them mature at all? We’re going to sit a bit with these questions today.

On recent Sunday mornings here at Broadview, we’ve been sitting with questions raised by the parables in the Gospel of Matthew. Altogether we have available to us forty distinct parables attributed to Jesus. Forty! That’s a lot. Only two of these forty are ‘explained’ in the text, and many Bible scholars think even these two ‘explanations’ were added in by the early church, and are not part of Jesus’ own authentic sayings. Usually, Parables need not be overly ‘explained’. They’re kind of like good wine: you want to swish them around a bit, take a little sip at a time, slowly contemplate their taste and their value. Charles’s reading of today’s about the weeds and wheat is like taking that first, slow sip. We sniff a bit more around the edges of the glass when the story gets retold for the children. Then, ready to take a deeper drink, we more fully ponder how the parable can be applied to our lives in both the sermon and, hopefully, in conversation that follows it.

Two things I always assume about the parables are these: 1) they can be ‘applied’ to our lives in more ways than one, and 2) they have both internal and external relevance. So in today’s parable about weeds and wheat, I assume that both of these are growing out in the big, wide world, and that both are growing inside ourselves as well.

When in today’s parable Jesus speaks of the farmer counseling his hired hands to not prematurely uproot the weeds that have mixed together with the wheat, he seems to be counseling us not to prematurely decide that any sentient being is absolutely good or absolutely evil; instead let everyone grow, and let God ‘be the judge in the end’. It’s a bit like Jesus counseled elsewhere, “Let the one who is totally without sin cast the first stone.”

One way we might apply this parable out in the big, wide world is this: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans have, only belatedly and at astonishingly great cost, been learning that rooting out the evil of terrorism is not as simple as pulling out individual terrorist ‘weeds’ from the ‘wheat’ of freedom-loving Iraqis, Palestinians and Afghans. Trying to prematurely rid the world of all terrorists by killing them off, locking them away without trial, or torturing them inevitably backfires on those who do or allow such criminal things to be done. When we try to accomplish an easy weeding out of all evildoers, we destroy the “wheat” too, we kill off non-terrorists. Modern warfare’s impatiently lethal nature is nondiscriminatory. It kills off everybody. The good wheat gets mowed down too. We only make things worse.

Weeds and wheat grow inside ourselves too. And – too often we mow down the good wheat there as well. “The psychologist Carl Jung explored the nature of the unconscious ‘shadow’ self that lives within each of us. The shadow gets filled up with the things we repress because we

don't like certain things. You might want to call it "the garbage can of the soul." We think we rid ourselves of our trash, but we can't, it's still around, and it starts to stink; behind conscious awareness, our shadow self controls us. We may not like it that we sometimes feel greedy or jealous or vengeful, so we pretend that we're not, that we never get those ways. We may minimize inappropriate actions of our representative government too: "Well, we're killing off evildoers, after all, only doing what's right." But in fact unexamined or minimized or repressed parts of our selves reemerge in unhealthy ways, and do much damage to both our individual and our collective soul. Carl Jung probably liked the parable of the wheat and weeds. He too believed that we have to be patient, that we can't just throw everything out that we don't like about our own selves or world, but rather need to recycle our trash, examining and sorting it out, using, getting in dialogue with, even loving life's more-shadowy or seemingly-trashy aspects. One way the church helps us do this is by offering rituals that allow us to confess our sins. In confessing them, we are not shaming ourselves for being sinners, but rather, examining parts of ourselves which would, if repressed or left unexamined, do us harm. Looking squarely at both the good and the not-so-good of our lives is a whole lot healthier and more mature than trying to pitch all our sins in one fell swoop into the hefty bag.

Still, wanting to mow evil down is not an inherently evil human instinct. At least it's an indication that we care passionately about good and evil and long to improve our world. So: tell us again, Jesus: why should we be patient with weedy kinds of behavior? Well, for one thing, *not all plants that look like weeds are weeds*. And sometimes even the so-called weeds have a divine purpose in our lives. Carl Jung would say, and I think Jesus would too, that we need to *pay attention* to weeds. We need to love those parts of ourselves that we tend to keep in the shadows, and to listen to those people in the world too who tend to be marginalized, the homeless, for instance, and people of other lands we might be tempted to call our enemy. We'll find when we pay attention...to weeds, some turn out to be wheat.

Here's a second reason: if we cut out all the presumed weeds, we may be left with nothing! Because in addition to the fact that not all growing things that look like weeds really are mere weeds, *not all growing things that look like wheat really are wheat!*

The Greek word for 'weeds' in our focus parable is 'zizania'. That's a very specific, very particular kind of weed. Today it is called in English, *darnel wheat*, or sometimes *tares*. (Wasn't it President Bush who used to say tare-ists instead of terrorists?) Anyway...Tares are 'bearded darnel', or in Latin, *lolium temulentum*, which is a species of rye grass. When bearded darnel is young and growing, it looks just like wheat; you can hardly tell the difference. It's like wild oats, which imitate true oats, or fool's gold which gets mistaken for real gold. It's fool's wheat. It's a weed that looks so similar to wheat, it fools you.

So here's the deal: bearded darnel bears this uncannily close resemblance to wheat *until the ear appears*, and only then the difference can be readily discovered.

"The problem with taking our hoe to the evil weeds of the world is that good and evil sometimes look so darn much alike. The difference only becomes clear later."

My dad was a farmer. It was his job to minimize, if not to eliminate weeds. But he was wise enough to know that not all weeds are exactly the same, and all weeds cannot be tackled in exactly the same way. You have to pay attention to their particular nature. A cockle burr, for instance – the one with the prickly little burrs that attach themselves to my dog’s fur and my own pant legs whenever we go hiking East of the Cascades – has shallow but widespread roots. To adequately uproot a cockle burr, you have to pull it out completely by the roots. If you hack it off at ground level with a hoe it’ll be back in less than a week. A milkweed, on the other hand, has a very long tap root that cannot be pulled out in one piece. If you try, usually three or more separate sprouts come back in less than a week. So with milkweeds, you have to do the exact opposite of what you do with cockle burrs – you hack off milkweed with a hoe so the sap will ‘bleed’ and the weed will die. Not all weeds are exactly the same. Neither are all kinds of problems in our lives. The strategy for some of them – let’s say, a substance abuse, an addiction to alcohol – may most appropriately be to cut off the stem, or should we say, turn off the spigot – just say no to drinking alcohol entirely – because the tap root of alcoholism is too deeply embedded in many people’s ground of being. But some addictive behavior patterns may have to be handled differently. You can’t “just say no” to all food because you’ve tended to overeat, and can’t give up on all relationships because you’ve gotten messed up in some that are problematic. Rather, you monitor the pattern that develop in your life over time, and try to get at the source of the problem, get to the root of weedy behavior: asking, “Why do I eat when I’m anxious?”; or “Why do I repeatedly hook up with people I’m not well-suited for?”

All this weed-sorting can get complicated, but it also makes life a lot more interesting. What we cannot do is just suddenly rid ourselves of all our weeds, because *we are our weeds; our weeds are us*. Our perceived weeds can turn out to be wheat, and our perceived wheat can turn out to be weeds. Our wheat and our weeds, our good and our not-so-good get mixed up in us all the time. Even the best-intended things we do, our deeds that wear our Sunday best, can have unintended tragic consequences. Once a member of the Chicago congregation I used to serve wanted to help out a somewhat impoverished teenager who often played basketball at our church. So she bought him a brand new stylish pair of sneakers he’d been wanting. It was kind of her, and the kid was, of course, thrilled, which, in turn, made my beneficent parishioner feel pretty good too. But the very next day, I noticed that the boy’s new shoes were missing, and that he was sporting a black eye and two badly-scraped arms. Instead of helping this kid, my well-intentioned parishioner had inadvertently singled him out as a target for street gang bullies. We dare not gloat in feeling as if we are pure, unadulterated wheat. We can’t quickly or easily weed out the bad. We are inevitably a mix of both.

But God has a way of making blessings out of such blendings, out of the chaotic, growing-together mix of wheat and weeds that we all are.

A concluding example: In spite of the noble efforts of our better leaders, our nation has not yet been able to root out racism. Racism has for too long been a poorly-examined shadowy part of our nation’s character. Racism has kept human being apart from each other, on guard against one another, dividing people into color and class hierarchies of presumed superiority and inferiority.

But things are changing. As of this date, the leading candidate for the next President of the United States is not only calling the nations to dialogue and away from diatribe, he’s also himself

a living, breathing example of an increasingly blending society. Most of the weddings I've officiated for have been for couples from different religious, cultural, or racial backgrounds. The upcoming generations in America are "blending" more and more. This is not only a trend, it's a very good trend. We can no longer afford to over-simplistically categorize everybody as weed and wheat, as black and white, as good people and evildoers. The world's never been black and white. It's always been a blend. We haven't always realized it. But I think people are starting to. Let's not be so quick to get into our separate bunkers, trying to do each other in. God's love doesn't work that way. God created us to be one. Not all weeds are mere weeds, not all wheat is really wheat, and yet immersed in God's grace, we can all mature together. Amen.