

"Gathering Weeds"
Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
July 20, 2008
Texts: Romans 8:12-14; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43
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In the parable Jesus tells, another parable involving sowing and reaping, the slaves of the householder become concerned because there are weeds in the wheat field. We can relate, can't we? We would much prefer not to have to deal with weeds—in our yards, in our flowerbeds, in the cracks in our driveways or parking lots. Weeds are a nuisance, and they seem to be everywhere. We, like the slaves of the householder, can get bent out of shape when it comes to weeds.

Jesus makes it clear in his explanation of the parable that the weeds are the bad people in the world. Weeds, in this case, represent the presence of evil around us. That bugs us too, doesn't it? And we tend to ask the same kind of questions the slaves ask the householder, namely, "How did the weeds get here? Where does evil come from? What is the source of the badness in our world?"

In his explanation of the parable, Jesus tries to teach his followers that *evil does not come from God*. The sower can't be blamed for the bad seed. The sower spread only good seed in the first place. God in Christ is not the source of evil in our world. God

doesn't make bad seed. There are good people and bad people to be sure, but God intends for everyone to be good.

Evil in our world sometimes comes as a result of people being intrinsically bad, bad to the bone as we sometimes say. But more often than not, evil in our world comes about as a result of relatively good but flawed people choosing to do bad things, either intentionally or accidentally. People make inappropriate and even destructive choices as a result of their free will. And some choose to live as children of the kingdom of God, while some choose to live like the devil, so to speak. The sower is good; the seed is basically good. *Seeds become bad when the choice for evil is made.* There are weeds among the wheat because of the bad decisions we often make.

I think the most important and at the same time the most challenging thing for us to notice in this parable is what we are supposed to do about the weeds, the bad people in our world. What is the answer to the weed problem we face? Our first response is most likely the same as the slaves: kill the weeds. That's what the slaves want to do just as soon as the weeds appear. Get out the hoe and start digging them up or get out the Roundup and start zapping them until they burn up. Get rid of them as soon as possible. That's the answer to the weed problem, the problem of evil in our world.

It's a good idea in theory, but a bad idea in practice. The parable makes it clear why: in trying to eradicate the weeds, some of the wheat could easily be uprooted. Collateral damage. The weeds and the wheat need to grow together until the wheat is ready to be harvested. Then it will be far easier to distinguish the one from the other. No wheat will be damaged, then, as the weeds are gathered.

I've had some experience along these lines, and I bet you have too. When I was the pastor of First UMC in Sachse, I, along with a church member, planted dozens of small jasmine plants in such a way as eventually to provide ground cover for a large flowerbed. A few months after we had toiled in the bed, the church administrator gave permission to our Girl Scout troop to weed the flowerbed as a service project. Unfortunately, the inexperienced little gardeners couldn't distinguish between the weeds and the jasmine plants, with disastrous results, that is, a ruined flowerbed with barely a jasmine plant surviving. All of our work in the bed had to be redone.

If there is one thing I have learned from years of gardening myself, it is this: weeds are smart. Millions of years of evolution have taught weeds to be the most clever of growing things. They are so hard to get rid of because they can look almost identical to the plants you want to grow, making it ever so easy to mistake what you want to kill for what you want to save. I bet you've seen a yard in

which someone has tried selectively to eliminate only the weeds by applying weed killer. What's the result? More often than not a brown yard. And have you noticed that weeds can and will grow so close to the desired plants that it requires the utmost care to remove them without damaging the plants? Weeds are smart.

Such is the case with evil in our world. It is hard to tell good people from bad ones and good deeds from bad ones because there is some good in the worst of us and some bad in the best of us. And because all of us, every last one of us, are fallen creatures, sinful persons, we can't always be trusted to tell the difference between good and evil. We make mistakes. We don't get it right all the time. Sometimes good people are punished unfairly and bad people get away with murder. We see it all the time. That is why many of us struggle like we do with capital punishment. We might feel better about it if our system of justice were infallible, but it's not. Killing the weeds may not be the best answer to the problem of evil in our world.

Jesus provides the best and yet the most disturbing answer to the weed problem in the parable and its explanation. What do we do about the weeds among the wheat? *Nothing. Nothing. Not a thing.* We let the weeds grow right alongside the wheat until the harvest. In other words, *we let God take care of the problem of evil in our*

world. We let God be the judge of what is good and what is bad. Ultimately we let God sort it out.

One of the many blessings I've received in serving seven different churches over the past twenty-two years has been the opportunity to learn from children in those congregations. Especially when it comes to matters of faith, children can have incredible insight and wisdom. In the last congregation I served, one first grader in particular, Parker Hamilton, functioned as a young theologian-in-residence. Parker was a deep thinker, so rather often he had theological questions. Believe, me he could come up with some real doozies.

On one occasion Parker came up with this question for me: "Pastor David, where do bad people go when they die?" I don't know why he was asking me this particular question. If I had asked such a question at his age of my pastor, I almost can guarantee it was because I had done something I shouldn't have and was concerned about my own eternal destination.

My answer to Parker was one that I feel like is in keeping with what Jesus is trying to teach us in this parable. I told him that *everyone who dies goes to be with God*, whether we might consider the person good or bad. God alone is qualified to make the final determination as to a person's goodness or badness, so we leave it up

to God. We might like to make that determination for ourselves, but it is far better for God to decide such matters. When we die, we go to be with God. God decides where we go from there.

I believe this to be true, and so, as I have told some of you before, everyone whose funeral I officiate goes to heaven, no questions asked. If I preach your memorial service, you are bound for the promised land. I have to admit that I've delivered a few eulogies in which I made statements concerning the deceased that I had to question myself. If it had been up to me to decide some people's final resting place, they would have gone straight to hell without passing *GO* or collecting their two hundred dollars.

But the point is that it is not up to me. Only God gets to make that decision, because only God is in the best position to make that decision. Only God is completely good, and only God knows enough to decide how good or bad we really are.

Good and evil must coexist until the endtimes. The weeds and the wheat are to grow together. We may not like it that way, but that's the way it is. We don't get to play God. So what do we do? What do we do about the existence of evil in our world? If we don't get to kill the weeds, what is there left for us to do to eliminate the bad—the bad people and the bad things they do?

The Apostle Paul tells us in our epistle lesson from Romans for this morning. And what he says is basically this: *instead of worrying about anyone else, we are to worry about ourselves.* We are to put to death the evil deeds of the body, the bad things *we* are guilty of. That's what we get rid of; that's what we kill. By the Spirit we are to make good decisions, choices that are pleasing to God and that further God's kingdom. We make sure we are doing what we should and let God take care of those who decide differently.

How can this approach possibly confront and deal appropriately with evil in our world? It is not stated as such in the parable Jesus tells, but I think we can figure it out. *We eliminate the weeds by tending to the wheat.* If we nurture the wheat, allowing it to grow as it is meant to grow, the weeds will be easier to live with and eventually to deal with. Fertilize and water the plants to be kept, and they, over time, will prosper and just may choke out what is undesirable.

The answer, then, is not killing what is bad; it is living in such a way as to make sure that good will prevail over time, by the grace of God. We are to worry about ourselves, making sure we put to death anything and everything that is evil in our lives, and we leave the rest to God. As Jesus says, "then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father."