

LET THE WEEDS BE
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Gardening for me is a never-ending battle with weeds. It seems unbelievable how many weeds there are. How could that many seeds that I had nothing to do with germinate in my carefully prepared soil? No matter how much I weed – and I hate weeding and never do near enough of it – I can never get them all. And even if I were to somehow manage to take every last pernicious weed out of my vegetable garden by the next day or two there would be a whole new crop of them.

The thing that I marvel at when I visit a beautiful well-tended garden (Longwood Garden in Philadelphia, the Gertrude Jekyll Garden at Glebe House in Woodbury and display gardens at nurseries), more than the fantastic garden design or the beautiful flowers or interesting plants, is the complete lack of weeds. How do they do it?! It almost seems unnatural.

Jesus noted that the field of God's Kingdom, much like my little vegetable garden, is chock full of weeds. That offended the sensibilities of the servants in the parable. I suspect it offended the sensibilities of Jesus' disciples. It offends my sensibilities too. Shouldn't God's field, God's garden, God's Kingdom be pure and perfect and free of weeds? Shouldn't purity be the goal we are to work for in the field of God's Kingdom? Shouldn't God's garden be as meticulous and perfect and weed free as the special showcase gardens we like to visit? Jesus said "*no*," let the wheat and the weeds grow up together until the harvest.

These words should make us glad. For if God's garden were a perfect, pure and weed free environment as we might think it should be, where would our place be in His garden? There are all kinds of plants in the field God sows, a mix of weeds and wheat – some doing really well and some not looking so healthy. It's all mixed up. It's God's job to sort it out, not ours.

In Palestine both wheat and bearded darnel weeds looked pretty much alike when they were young shoots. They could only be told apart when they were older, but by then the roots would be intertwined and to pull up the weeds would threaten the wheat. The master in the parable sowed good seed in his fields, but as the seedlings grew it soon became apparent that the fields were as full of bearded darnel as they were with wheat. His servants suggested that they pull the weeds but the master said "*no*." To gather up the weeds would endanger the wheat. "*Let both of them grow together until the harvest*," he said. At the harvest they can be separated – the weeds burned and the wheat gathered into my barns.

There were some over eager weed-pullers in Jesus' parable. The disciples too were eager weed-pullers and needed Jesus to explain the parable to them. Over eager weed-pullers have plagued the Church since that time. According to a 2006 Gordon Conwell Seminary listing there are presently 38,000 Christian denominations or similar distinct organizations. That's 37,999 times that Christians said that there were too many weeds in God's field and a group of them set about to establish a more pure weed-free environment. There have certainly been many great reformers, theologians, preachers,

prophets, priests and teachers who led those movements to purify the Church. We have been blessed by their call to deeper, purer faith. Their devotion and zeal inspire us. They have offered many helpful corrections that the Church has been all too slow to follow. But each of these reformers and separatists missed the point of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds.

The Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church are deeply divided. Right now all the bishops in the Anglican Communion are gathering for a once every 10 year gathering – the Lambeth Conference, meeting in Canterbury, England. But about 200 bishops are keeping away because they disapprove of actions and beliefs of particularly the Episcopal Church. Many of them gathered in a competing conference two weeks ago called GAFCON, or the Global Anglican Future Conference. Various individuals, parishes and even whole dioceses are trying to split from the Episcopal Church because they want a purer, and from their perspective, more Biblical Church.

Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds tells us that the wheat and the weeds are all intertwined together. It is not our job to separate them out. It's not so easy to tell them apart. And when we think we're pulling up weeds we're really tearing up wheat. We are not to judge. We are not to decide who is fit and who is not fit for the Kingdom of God. That's God's job and God will take care of it in God's time. Our job is to grow the wheat.

The good news here is God's forbearance. God is not in a hurry to judge. God is content for weeds and wheat to grow up together in His field, His Church, His Kingdom. God is not anxious to separate the weeds from the wheat, the pure from the impure, the righteous from the unrighteous. We are the ones who tend to be anxious, not God. God is patient with His Church, His Kingdom. God is patient with us. That's good news.

The world is a mixed place with weeds and wheat, good and bad and indifferent people all mixed up together. The Church of Christ is a mixed community too. We ourselves as individuals are also a mixture of good and bad, strong and weak, pure and impure.

What the master in Jesus' parable does is focus on the goal of bringing forth an abundant harvest. Pulling the weeds at this stage would only take away from that harvest. Rather than separate out weeds from wheat he wants his servants to focus on nurturing the healthy growth of all the plants. Water and fertilize them.

For us in the Church I think that means focusing on our own spiritual growth and not on the sins of our neighbors. Our work as servants of the Master should be focused on growing in Jesus' love, on growth in serving and helping others, in learning more about God's Word – the Scriptures, in following Jesus. Our work should be helping each other grow as well.

At the harvest time each plant will be recognized by its own fruits as wheat or a weed. We also will be known ultimately by our fruits. And so it is that fruitfulness that we want to nurture. How can we as individuals and as a parish bear more and better fruit in Jesus' name?

At the present we are not to try and distinguish between the wheat and weeds in God's field. It's amazing how easy it is to get it wrong. And even if we do get it right it's amazing how trying to root out the faithless and misbehaving will also hurt the faithful to their very core. So, we are not to judge, but let God do the judging.

Remember that when we are dealing with God, even what looks like a weed can become wheat. I do not care if it is a noxious weed today. The time may come by God's great grace when it will produce wheat.