

“All Together Now”
August 6, 2023

Isaiah 44:6-8
Matthew 13:24-30

The curious sign by the farm entrance read: “Free Weeds—U Pick ‘Em.”

It seemed like some sort of “Tom Sawyer” approach to agriculture—let people think that they’re having fun and getting a good deal when they’re actually working without pay. After all, we’ve got to get rid of those weeds somehow. Pick ‘em. Spray them. Dig them up. Sure, Ralph Waldo Emerson told us that a weed is just a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered. But who wants to take a chance, really, when virtue appears to be so lacking.

We’ve got to get rid of those weeds.

Lots of people have this concern. You even find it in churches—I don’t know, maybe especially in churches.

I read about the pastor of a church in North Carolina who told his congregation that anyone who planned to vote for a particular Democratic candidate should either leave the church or repent. Nine members, including three deacons, had their membership revoked because they were Democrats. Those nine walked out of a church meeting when they were asked to sign documents agreeing with the pastor’s political views.

Not something to try here.

But we’ve got to get rid of those weeds.

Weeds bother us.

If you’ve ever had a garden or a field, you know the surprise, or maybe even the despair that comes when those unvirtuous plants, those *weeds*, first make their appearance. We are shocked. “Where did those weeds come from?” we ask. We planted good seeds.

It happens outside of our gardens as well. Those bags of Scott’s premium grass seed tell consumers that they contain a small percentage of weeds. Most of our actions, however, don’t carry such warnings. We open our church doors and who knows who will walk through them. We act with good intentions and the results we get are mixed at best. And when we dare to look—to *really look*—at our own lives, well we know that there are a lot of weeds growing all around.

We hear a commonsense proposal. “Do you want us to go and gather the weeds?” It’s a sensible suggestion phrased as a question. “Free Weeds—U Pick ‘Em.”

We’ll get out there and begin a self-improvement program.

We’ll get out there and—even better—start improving *other people*.

We'll trim the rolls and get rid of the deadbeats—I mean *inactive members*. Before you know it, the field will look great, our lives will be presentable, the congregation will be beautiful, the world will shine.

We've got to do something.

Weeds bother us.

Listen to what the owner of the field says: "Leave the weeds alone!" Don't pick 'em, spray 'em, or dig 'em. Leave them alone.

We are probably more shocked by the response of the owner than we are by the presence of the weeds. Reflecting on that response, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "This is a parable taken from agriculture to illustrate a point of morals, and it violates every principle of agriculture or of morals. After all, every farmer and every gardener makes ceaseless war against the weeds. How else could the flowers and the wheat grow? And we have to make ceaseless war against evil within ourselves and in [others], or how could there be any kind of decency in the world?"ⁱ

The problem, of course, is the results that our constant vigilance could have. In pulling up the weeds, we will also pull up the wheat.

Do you begin to get a glimpse of the living God in this story?

Do you begin to get a glimpse of the great love that God has for us?

Knowing us better than we know ourselves, God recognizes that we are incapable of separating the weeds from the wheat. Norris says that "Any parent, watching a child grow up, can see some weeds in the wheat. And while we try to teach a child right from wrong, when it comes to spotting those weeds and uprooting them, we can't be perfect ourselves and can't expect others to be."ⁱⁱⁱ

Yes, we make our judgments. Yes, we will try to do good, to seek justice, to make peace. While we make judgments, however, we recognize that there is a judgment beyond our judgment; there is a fulfillment beyond our fulfillment. We can't separate the weeds from the wheat in our own lives, or in our communities, or in our world.

And so we need to depend more on mercy than on judgment. We need to err on the side of compassion.

And—good news!—this is what God does as well: favoring mercy and compassion over judgment and contempt.

As shocking as all of this is, maybe neither we nor those who first heard this parable should be surprised. After all, when Jesus began to teach those who would follow him, he made it clear that God causes the sun to rise on the good and the bad alike; God causes the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust. And so, he reminds us that weeds and wheat belong together.

This was certainly part of the understanding of our Puritan and early Congregational ancestors in faith. While they often failed to live up to this understanding, at their best they were deeply aware of the reality that it's just not possible to judge another person—or even oneself. And so, they affirmed that there were two churches—the visible church, the one you can see here and now, and the invisible church, the one God alone knows. Until the final judgment, there is no way of telling the weeds from the wheat—and no way of separating them.

Occasionally we see evidence of this even here at the Congregational Church.

As a congregation we are able to include a wide range of political opinions as well as cultural values. Go down to Rockwood Hall after worship and behold!—the weeds and wheat together! I'm not going to say who's who. But there we are: all together now!

We don't try to weed out one group, in part because we don't want to pull out some of the wheat—and in part because, well, *we might be weeds ourselves*.

Remember that pastor who tried to weed out those church members who were Democrats? He was asked to resign.

Listen to what the owner of the field says: “Leave the weeds alone.”

Remember what Jesus said by way of introducing this parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like this.” Remember that when Jesus speaks of the realm of heaven, he is not primarily talking about *what happens to us* when we die. He is much more concerned with *what we do* while we are living. Yes, the realm of heaven is God's place; and it is the place where the Creator God is at work redeeming the creation that God loves. That is, the realm of heaven is here in our midst if we will just open our eyes and our hearts and *look*—and we are given parables such as this to improve our sight.

“The kingdom of God is like this.” The realm in which we live and move and have our being is like this—

It is a place of patient waiting, where judgment is set aside so that growth might occur.

It is a time that is moving toward harvest—when the judgment will be sterner than our own; when the mercy, too, will be far beyond what we might ever show.

It is the realm in which the good wheat will be gathered and even weeds will be put to use. Darnel—the weed that was sown in secret, the weed that was left among the wheat—was used for fuel in ancient times. And so, of course it would be gathered to be burned.

Nothing is lost in the realm of God. No *one* is lost.

Nothing is beyond God's redemption. No *one* is beyond God's redemption.

Judgment and mercy beyond our imagining—*this* is what the realm of God is like.

Back in the 1880's John Burroughs said: "One is tempted to say that the most human plants, after all, are the weeds."

Probably so.

And here we are: wheat among weeds—or weeds among wheat.

Keep doing those things that you do: love one another, seek justice, do kindness. Do all of these in the midst of the weeds because they're not going to go away and you'll only make things worse by pulling them up.

This is what I'm getting at in reminding you and encouraging you each week not to return evil for evil, not to seek the downfall of other people or institutions, but instead, to seek the good in all things that you do. Let the weeds remain—but be better than the weeds. I've been told that the best treatment for weeds in my lawn is to strengthen the grass, so that what is desired overcomes what is not wanted.

That's what I'm telling you: be better, be stronger than the weeds.

With Emerson, we would agree that, for the most part, as is the case with weeds, our own virtues have not yet been discovered.

As we wait and watch for those wonderful discoveries, take hope in what we hear and see in Jesus: God's realm encompasses the whole field in which we grow, we are surrounded by love and mercy.

ⁱ Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, pg. 55-56.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, pg. 317.