

*"Weeding in the Garden"*

*Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

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The story is told of a preacher who went to visit a church member who had a garden. The gardener took the preacher out and proudly showed the fruits of her labors. Surveying the beautiful flowers and ripening crops in neatly ordered, well-weeded rows, the preacher declared, "God has certainly made you a beautiful garden." The church member corrected him, "God ***and I*** have made a beautiful garden." The preacher replied, "Don't you think that's a little nervy?" "No," came the answer, "you should have seen what it looked like when just God had it!"

Nature can run wild, whether it is in a garden or in human beings. In response, we have a desire to go and weed. That's what this sermon is about. Weeding in the garden.

We all know about that desire to weed, to clear out invasive plant species, to help create the visual beauty of a garden, English or otherwise. Surely garden weeding is important. Some of you like to do that and do it well. Not me. As a kid working in my parents' garden under the humidity and heat of a Maryland summer, I hated weeding. It always seemed like I was doing it on the hottest day of the year, after the longest dry spell of the year, when the weeds seemed anchored in concrete, when I'd rather be doing a million other things.

Advance the calendar 50 years. My dad can no longer care for his property, and part of what I do when I go to visit him is – you guessed it – weed. This last visit was particularly annoying since my brother, who is otherwise awesome, used cheap mulch that not only didn't keep the weeds down but also had weeds in it, one of which grew over six feet tall when I

removed it ten days ago. There is no more satisfaction weeding now than a half-century ago, and no nostalgia in that memory. Here in Connecticut, I'm quite content to watch Carol tend the thyme in our small backyard garden, thank you very much.

But there are other types of weeding to which I'm drawn and, I suspect, you are, too. It's an urge to separate the good from the bad, the right from the wrong, the righteous from the unrighteous. This kind of weeding is important, too. On the cusp of World War II, the young Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned about the danger of "cheap grace," proclaiming God's love and redemption without the related call to work for justice and personal holiness. Too much of the German church to which he proclaimed this was complicit with the Nazi regime, and Bonhoeffer's courage cost him his life. The Church today still aspires to the virtue of the Christ whose name it bears; and the United Methodist Church remains sadly complicit in discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. We have weeding to do.

Yet even if the garden we call "church" is growing fairly well, the garden of the world is, frankly, a mess. Murders, racism, ethnic cleansing, war....the weeds are out in force and this kind of weeding looks like straightforward kingdom work.

The problem is, mistakes can be made. I wrote in my "Grace Notes" article today that the problem with judging the measure of another person's personal responsibility is that we don't always have all the facts, or the history, or the context: that personal responsibility is ultimately personal. In a similar vein, another reason I don't like weeding in the garden is that I can't always tell the plants from the weeds. As a kid, I often couldn't tell weeds from the new corn sprouts in Mom and Dad's vegetable garden. From the beginning of time, Darnel, the weed, has looked like wheat. And then there is the problem, noted in today's parable, of intertwined roots. The

good plants can be destroyed with the bad when we weed indiscriminately or hastily or prematurely. The same can happen with trying to judge and separate “good” and “bad” people, too.

In Jesus’ parable, an enemy has sown the weeds. The well-meaning servants ask the farmer if he wants them to weed. The farmer answers no. “Let them grow together until the harvest.”

The story tells us we must let the weeds be. We can’t weed. Well, we can, but we run the risk of misidentification. Even if we could make the proper I.D., as a gardener (Isabel T.) told me at one of my former churches, “One person’s weed is another person’s wildflower.” And it’s likely, as in the parable, that we will uproot the good along with the bad. Then there’s the rest of the field – beyond our lifetime range of weeding.

For some, this is comforting news. It comes as a relief, permission granted to abandon a hopeless cause. After all, the weeds return every year. But mostly this gospel is challenging news. Living with the weeds and doing nothing is a hard word to hear. For list-making, works-grounded, justice-hearted folks, this is hard. We wet our thumbs and start flipping through the Good Book for other sayings, other guidelines, the ones about righteousness, discipline, even censure. And they are there. But not today.

Today, the story is that we must let the weeds be. Exactly that, as verse 30 says: “Let them be.” Permit. Allow. Suffer. The word in the Greek New Testament, *aphiemi* (af-**I**-e-mi) is also translated “forgive.” Forgive the weeds to live. If we wet our thumbs and start flipping around to find out more about THAT, we might find these words from Jesus: “Judge not that ye be not judged.” (Matthew 7:1). If we wet our thumbs and

start flipping around to find out more about that, we might actually come to the cross.

Who knows what is the right balance between permissiveness and action, suffering and justice, tough endurance and tough love? There are plenty of us around who are dressed and ready to weed. That needs to happen, but only with great humility, great awe, under the clear direction of the gardener and at the time the gardener directs.

You see, this is God's job. God, the master gardener. God will weed. In the end, the wheat will be saved; the weeds bundled and burned. So in the end this word is comfort, with a tinge of reprimand thrown in. Not just that we can't weed, but that it's not up to us to weed. God will weed. In the end, given the weediness in our mixed-harvest selves, perhaps that is action enough. Amen.