

Sermon for July 19, 2020 based on Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43

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When we moved into our house close to 20 years ago, we became owners and caregivers of a beautiful three-tier garden. It was one of the things I was excited about. It had peonies, bleeding hearts, hosta, day lilies...and many more I have no idea what were because I was not a gardener. I knew nothing about gardening other than flowers looked pretty in the backyard. It didn't take long to learn that there was more to gardening than visual appreciation. The first problem became I didn't know the difference between a weed and a flower. I had not planted the garden so I had no idea what was supposed to be there and what was supposed to be picked. I also discovered I didn't like weeding. It was time intensive. Many of the weeds had secret defense mechanisms that resulted in prickles to the fingers and all of them made me sneeze. Within the first few years we abandoned the idea of having a beautiful three-tiered garden. At first we considered having it all torn out and sodded – just eliminate the whole thing. Turns out that too would be a timely and costly mission. So we left it. We let it grow, flowers and weeds side by side.

Here is what is surprising to me: Beautiful things have grown up in that area. We now have two trees, one a very sturdy, perfectly shaped evergreen tree that has become our outside Christmas tree. And if you look you can still see the day lilies, the bleeding hearts, the hosta. This area of weeds and flowers has also become a sanctuary for many a creature: birds, chipmunks, squirrels, the occasional deer. This season both a fox and a skunk have wandered out of that area. Baby bunnies are safe in its shelter from even our dogs that are out there every day.

Last summer as we sat on the deck with a guest. She said “You have a beautiful backyard – I love how everything has grown up so full and inviting”. Ha!

For years that garden space made me feel guilty. It was an embarrassing eye sore, proof to the neighborhood and all that came to the space that I was failing in my responsibility. I felt obligated to weed. It is what you are supposed to do right – get rid of the weeds?

It is why today's gospel reading is so striking: a master and slave are surveying the wheat fields that have been overrun by weeds. The slave is baffled “Master did

you not sew good seed in your field? Where did these weeds come from?" The Master answers "An enemy has done this." The slave asks "Do you want us to go and weed?" But the Master responds "No, for in gathering weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest."

Too often we as Christians feel a sense of obligation to weed. We survey the field that is the world and began to distinguish between what we think is weed and flower. We search for what needs to be uprooted and taken out of the field. We may find ourselves looking through weeder eyes even as we look at our neighbors, trying to discern "beautiful flower" or "invasive weed".

God steps into this parable and reminds us weeding is not our job: "Do you want us to go and weed?" - "No, let them both grow together". Let the flowers and the weeds grow together. Let the good that is planted and the bad that the enemy sews grow together.

How do we receive these words? We may kind of like being weeders sometimes. In our own insecurity and fears it can feel stabilizing to put on a lens that allows us to look at the world and categorize the flowers and the weeds, the good and the bad. There can be a sense of calling and mission if empowered to weed. We may believe we can identify and root out evil to leave room for the good. There can be a sense of satisfaction at finding a weed and removing it. The problem is we are not the original planter and we are not God of the harvest. Weeding is not our job.

This text also requires us to consider where this field of flowers and weeds resides. Is this parable even a parable about weeds and the flowers, the good and the evil that grow side by side in the world? It always strikes me that we are quick to assume we would be the flower, the wheat. Instead is this really a parable of the weeds and flowers that grow side by side within each of us? Maybe this text reminds us that we are simultaneously weed and flower, weed and wheat, sinner and saint.

God has created us. We are made good. Yet when we truly survey all our tiers, when we take an honest look at the field within us, we may find ourselves before God confessing "Master did you not sew good seed in this field? Where did these weeds come from?" We are not such beautiful gardens and fields after all.

With frantic obligation we begin to try to get rid of the weeds within ourselves. We commit to only growing flowers, only growing goodness. But weeds grow effortlessly. Despite our best efforts we cannot pull off being a weed-free field. I think of Paul's writing in Romans from a few weeks ago "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate...I have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out." Even at my best I am weedy. We know the condition of our own fields – maybe that is why we are so quick to volunteer to weed out in the world instead. Do we sometimes need to believe there are weedier fields in the hopes that we can falsely bargain with God – "mine doesn't look that bad, right?"

But the hardest part of the gospel is still coming:

The parable says "Let them grow together until the harvest". Until the harvest. This parable is alarming not only because it reminds us we are not weeders and that we are weedy, but also because it reminds us harvest time will come. It continues "At harvest time I will tell the reapers, collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned but gather the wheat into my barn". Jesus clarifies "so it will be at the end of the age. The Son-of-Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his dominion all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the dominion of their Father."

Only in arrogance, our self-centeredness, would we find comfort in these words – why would we assume we are wheat? Why would we want anyone thrown into the furnace of fire? How could weeping and gnashing of teeth ever be a good thing?

So where is the good news in this text?

We are not weeders AND we are not righteous. The good news – we believe our identity is found in Jesus who is. Jesus has already taken our weediness unto himself. We are made righteous wheat, only through Christ's righteousness. The work has already been done – the harvest already secured in Christ. For Christ carried us in all our weeds to the cross, overcame the furnace of fire, ended the weeping and gnashing of teeth, and shines like the sun in the presence of God.

We begin every one of our worship services confessing our sin, our weediness, and hearing the words of assurance that Christ loved us even when we were dead in sin, even when we were full of weeds, and made us alive together in Christ.

We Lutherans like to say we live simultaneously in the “now and the not yet”. Right now you have been forgiven despite your weeds and saved through Christ despite your lack of righteousness. You live as righteous by Christ’s name sake alone and await the harvest when we will have dominion with God through Christ. Yet the harvest has not yet fully come and the end of all weeds is yet to be experienced in its fullness. We live in the “not yet”, in hope and assurance of the final harvest to come.

We have the freedom to choose how we live in this in between time, until the fullness of God’s kingdom: Can we let go of our “weed picker” lens and stop feeling the need to identify weeds that should be pulled? Can we instead remember the God who plants and the instructions “grow together until the harvest”? Can we look at a world full of both flowers and weeds and still see God at work?

Can we claim our own messy fields? Amidst our own wheat and weeds can we claim our righteousness in Christ alone? Can we set down our fear, our frantic attempts to do our own weeding, and know that the harvest is already secured through God’s goodness in Christ?

Find a moment to sit outside or take a walk this week. Try not to distinguish between flower and weed. Instead stand back and look at what lies in front of you and simply proclaim: “Wow God, your backyard is beautiful; everything has grown up to be so full and inviting. Thank you God for filling and inviting all your creation to be part of the fullness of your harvest in Christ.”